



How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

FLORENTYNA LEOW

HOW KYOTO BREAKS YOUR HEART

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For everyone who has ever lost a friend



THE EMMA PRESS

First published in the UK in 2023 by The Emma Press Ltd.

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Cover design © Elina Brasliņa 2023.

Edited by Pema Monaghan.

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ISBN 978-1-915628-00-8

EPUB ISBN 978-1-915628-01-5

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK

by TJ Books, Padstow.

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Birmingham, UK

Foreword

To belong is to be in a relationship. Relationships take time and exchange. Relationships are risks.

– Zedeck Siew

Capturing a city in words is impossible, but everyone tries. Many books have been written about Kyoto over the years. Some offer wisdom and insight into its culture; others philosophise over its art. More than a few document its temples and gardens, and even more dispense travel recommendations backed by authoritative comments from local residents.

This is none of those books. I'm no expert on this city. What I can tell you is that no two people ever see it in quite the same way, although that's probably true of all places. Your Kyoto will not be the same as mine. The very fact of who you are will shape your experience of it: the path you walk, the people you meet, the hall of memories you create in your dreams.

What does home mean when you emigrate? What does it mean to find home elsewhere? What if you keep leaving – what then? I've migrated twice and moved cities six times since I turned 19, and I'm still thinking about it. Specifically, how so many places can feel at once like home and not. How they slip under my skin in their own separate ways. I splinter and fracture, becoming different people in each place. Each city has been the stage for a life lived. A different cast, a new storyline. Meetings, departures, heartbreaks. Another notch, another scar on my heart.

The following pages are a brief record of trying to find a home in Kyoto; a series of sketches, vignettes, and attempts to make sense of all the ways you can love a place. Here's what I've figured out so far: when you try to belong somewhere, your chosen home becomes a reminder of what you stand to lose. It will shape you, make you, break you. To love a place is to love its people, and to love a place is to let it break your heart.

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Persimmons

Persimmon blossoms emerge in June, petite and cream-coloured, as though clusters of buttery pursed lips have sprouted all over the tree – or so I’m told. I can’t recall the persimmon tree in this garden ever flowering. Bright green leaves one day, fruit the next – they seem to blink into being overnight as June’s rainy season subsides, oval lumps swelling over the summer months until blushing orange in autumn, like a thousand little suns festooning the tree. Visiting crows peck away at persimmons on the highest branches. Some ripen all too quickly, landing in fragrant, messy puddles in the undergrowth, a feast for wasps and songbirds alike.

It is early October now, a warm, sunny afternoon with a dreamlike cast, and we’re harvesting persimmons. The tree is still lush and green; in a few weeks it will be bare, scattering leaves in a brilliant carpet of mottled tangerine and vermillion. She shimmies up the ladder and snips away at the fruit-laden boughs with red shears. I catch them – mostly – and prise the persimmons from the branches by their calyxes. If I close my eyes I can still hear our peals of laughter, her yelps and curses as some fruit falls into the roof gutters. *Oh fuck!* I can feel myself shaking with laughter. I look up. Her hair glints in the sun.

When we have harvested close to three-quarters of the tree we call it a day. The persimmons spill out across the veranda by the hundreds, far more than we can reasonably eat by ourselves. We’ll pile them up in a corner, but for now we make persimmon angels: arms spread, surrounded by abundance. Autumn sunshine streams in through the glass of the sliding doors. My heart catches a little, as though there’s a glass splinter inside. I’m already weeping for the moment as it slips away. I’m happy. It hurts. I think this is where I’m supposed to be.

This is how I remember her still: luminous, laughing, haloed by sunlight and sunset-coloured fruit.

■ ■

I spent two years in Kyoto during my twenties, sharing a house with a friend I'd known from university in London. She contacted me a few months after I'd arrived in Japan to ask if I wanted to work remotely with her at her current job and also move in with her. She would be asking her housemate (whom she couldn't stand) to leave. I didn't know her particularly well, but I knew I enjoyed being around her, admired her relentless drive, her sardonic wit and colourful stories, her taste in ceramics, her depth of knowledge on traditional art and culture – and I would have jumped at any opportunity to leave my job in Tokyo. It made sense. I had a way out of the retail job I hated, and she would have a colleague to share her increasing workload with and a new housemate.

The job itself was mundane: customer services, consisting largely of emails to and from clients wanting to travel to Japan on guided tours. But I genuinely loved the products I sold, and for all their flaws the company management had a real knack for attracting good-hearted people with fascinating backgrounds, and creating an unusually tight-knit working culture where everyone could more or less understand the role they played and why it was essential. In other words, even though it was poorly paid and I was ultimately replaceable, I knew the work really meant something to the company, and it provided – at least initially – that sense of purpose I craved. It was the only full-time position I had actually ever wanted, so I was determined to make it work.

Adding to the novelty of the situation was the house I shared with her. It was a single-storey building ensconced in the northeastern suburbs below Mt. Hiei – more of a hill than a real mountain – and rented from a couple living in upstate New York. From the nearest station, you made your way through a shotengai¹ and up a hill, through a few slender, unnamed lanes and turnings before arriving at a nondescript-looking house encircled by a modest garden space, which for the most part lay unused. The waist-high gate to the property tended to stay ajar, more there to mark a boundary than provide security.

Like many houses in Japan, it was poorly insulated, with thin walls that shook and rattled whenever an earthquake shuddered through the city. The floorboards creaked and complained, especially in the deafening silence of 3am when I stumbled my way to the toilet on the other side of the house. Summer invariably saw several cockroaches the size of golf balls scuttling across the kitchen floor, and winter had us huddling close to fume-spewing kerosene heaters which only ever warmed the room to a tepid temperature at best.

None of that mattered. I loved the house, and as far as I remember she did too. My bedroom window faced the front garden and its unruly carpet of weeds, and I could see Mt. Hiei most days, mist clinging to its silhouette in the mornings. At the other end of the house, the kitchen overlooked a spacious and endlessly abundant community garden, where local residents planted all manner of delicious things year-round – bitter melon, cucumber, aubergine, daikon – and beyond the surrounding suburbs more mountains lay in the distance. I hadn't realised I missed looking at the vast bowl of sky above until I left Tokyo and its tall buildings, and there were many days my heart would ache with pleasure just looking out of the kitchen window.

What I loved most about this house, though, was the persimmon tree.

At the heart of the house was a room lined with tatami mats, which my friend used as her bedroom. It was bordered by an engawa – a kind of veranda, an L-shaped, metre-wide corridor running along the edges of this room – and looked out into the central garden. A few pine trees and bushes dotted a space covered mostly with grasses. On the right, a Japanese maple extended its spidery branches over a petite nandina bush that had dark glossy leaves, and bright red berries in winter. To the left, the persimmon tree: relatively young and sprightly, a knobbly lichen- and moss-furred trunk stretching languorously towards the sky. It had rarely been pruned and it towered above the roof, ending in a spray of skinny branches at its crown, like a halo of flyaway baby hair.

Despite growing up in a tropical country, I thought I'd learned about seasons from my few years in the UK. But the persimmon tree showed me how little I understood. I'd never taken the time to observe how plants morph and shift over a year, how they can take on a dozen different faces and still delight you week after week. Spring begins with bright yellow-green leaves that darken as summer approaches and fruit forms. Autumn breathes shades of fire, rust, bronze into the leaves, which blanket the ground as the cold creeps in. Persimmons tend to remain long after the leaves have fallen, slender branches weighed down by clusters of fruit slowly rotting and shrivelling out of reach. You leave some behind for the birds, 木守り kimamori, as a way of ensuring good harvests and fortunes for the coming year. And winter, eventually, outlines its skeleton in inches of settled snow. So the cycle goes.

■ ■

How do you describe something you've never eaten before? I had no frame of reference for this fruit. A just-ripe persimmon off our tree was sweet, crisp, honey-like. When its flesh ripened even further, becoming soft and pulpy, it tasted like an autumn mango, hints of toasted brown sugar and dates and a dash of cinnamon. It tasted like the sound of a clarinet – silky, mellow and warm. I assumed all persimmons could be eaten straight off the tree. I didn't know that hundreds of varieties existed, or that they fell broadly into astringent and non-astringent types. Later, I found out the hard way that an under-ripe astringent persimmon tastes like a thousand green bananas, and turns your tongue into a shag rug for half an hour.

It was the first time I had lived up close with an actual fruit tree. The autumn bounty felt miraculous and impossible, these mounds of beautiful imperfect fruits with their bruises and webs of blemishes, so different from perfectly square supermarket persimmons suffocating in their plastic prisons. Without any effort the tree simply grew, year after year, a gift unasked for. It felt a bit like my life: a job, a friend, a tree, a roof over my head, all of these things I hadn't

asked for but had received like a benediction. It took years to stop feeling guilty for all this good fortune.

■ ■

Things I've told myself over the years: *She must have had her reasons. She may have outgrown you. You weren't compatible with who she was becoming. You were a lot to handle as a friend. Okay, you kind of sucked. You never felt things by halves, and neither did she. She may have seen this as a toxic relationship. Her feelings are valid and so are yours. You have become different people. It's okay to miss someone who isn't in your life anymore.*

■ ■

Life in the house revolved around the kitchen, where we answered emails and took phone calls across from each other at a rickety white IKEA table. In the kitchen we worked, cooked, listened to music, and got to know each other better. I wasn't accustomed to sharing space so closely with someone who wasn't family or, indeed, to tending to the logistics of a shared household, and I suspect she would have lived by herself if the rent had been tenable on our low salaries. In retrospect, it's fair to say we were not the best match as housemates. Oh, who am I kidding – we were lousy for each other! I was a messy night-owl blundering through my twenties, a bungler with good intentions, a loud kitchen singer constantly trying to feed her. When I knew her, she was a tidy morning person, a furiously-focused bundle of dreams and ambitions and energy, who at times subsisted mostly on vegetable smoothies and chocolate. She introduced me to Oliver Sacks. She had a weakness for limited-edition Haagen-Dazs ice cream. She held herself to incredibly high standards in work and in life, and did not suffer fools gladly. I loved her. Fiercely and unstintingly, the way you love someone you think is going to be in your life forever.

I couldn't bear to think of her or the house for many years, and have since excised so many memories I can't remember whether we even ate together towards the end of her time there. But I know we shared many meals in that kitchen. I still have photos of things I

cooked for us: crêpes with bacon and eggs, generously smeared with Dijon mustard; scrambled eggs and garlic chives; spaghetti con pangrattato crowned with a molten-yolked fried egg; kimchi-jjigae, a dish I cook for people I love.

After the persimmon harvest, I combed through blogs and recipe books jotting down ideas for using the fruit in notebooks and scraps of paper I've now lost or discarded. One of the first things I made was persimmon jam, attempting to use up the rapidly-spoiling fruit. In between answering emails, I deseeded the persimmons and tossed the pulp into my largest pot along with sugar and lemon or yuzu juice. It was a tremendously messy process. Sometimes it took hours to make a single batch, and starting after work hours meant I'd be stirring well past midnight. Several inches of pulp cooked right down to a scant few tiny jars of jam, all the more precious for the labour that went into them. Neither of us were really jam people to begin with, but I loved how meditative the whole process was. Eventually, I gave almost all of the jars away.

Another time, I invited Z up to the house so he could help us eat the persimmons, and he made us dinner. I'd made persimmon chutney and an experimental persimmon black pepper jam. He mixed the two together, along with reduced persimmon puree, then simmered several chicken thighs – after painstakingly removing the white, stringy tendons from each piece – in the resulting sauce. The finishing touch: blowtorching the chicken skins until crisp and charred. It was sweet and savoury, salty and fruity, begging for bread to drag through the sauce. I'd taken a stab at making persimmon pudding on her request – it was more like a sloppy persimmon custard, rich with nutmeg and clove – and Z blowtorched a layer of sugar on top for a brûlée. The caramel carapace was too thick, and instead of cracking elegantly it simply sank into the pudding below when she tapped it. *Damn*, she said, and it was so anticlimactic, so comical that we laughed until our sides ached.

■ ■

We have so many ways to handle romantic breakups, but so few to navigate friendship breakups. It's hard to talk about losing

close friends. Most of us don't have the vocabulary for it, because it feels like failing at a compulsory class everyone passes just for turning up. It's a painful and embarrassing fuck-up, a wound you can't admit to publicly. Sometimes there are obvious, explosive reasons: some catalyst, a fight, an incident you can point to. Those are the easy ones. More often it ends in silence. I don't mean those that die a natural death, where you grow apart from each other. I mean the abrupt stops, the disappearances, the ghostings. The ones that lack closure. Those feel even worse because you don't realise they're dead until much later, after the weight of messages unread and unresponded to finally sinks in. For a while you examine all the evidence to try and understand what happened. You have a sneaking suspicion it is you. Sometimes there are too many hints and not enough leads, no compelling arguments in anyone's favour, and no-one to answer your questions. Often it remains unsolved – not even a cold case, simply filed and forgotten by everyone except you.

■ ■

Astringent persimmons are inedible unless they are perfectly ripe. At their best, their creamy, custardy flesh takes on crimson or sunset-golden hues, trembling like jelly when you scoop it out with a spoon. The other thing to do with them is to make hoshigaki, or dried persimmons. They are dark and wine-sweet, with a deep caramel flavour and soft leather chew. In autumn, every other house in the countryside seems to have strings of them hanging from their eaves, and in sunlight they almost look like chains of fire opals adorning the windows.

She loved hoshigaki, so I attempted to make them. They're no good if the persimmons have already begun to ripen; for these, you need perfectly unripe fruit. I had climbed up a tree in the neighbourhood on a fallow plot of land and picked a baker's dozen of wild astringent persimmons. A few days later, we peeled them and I tied them together – clumsily – with twine by their stems and calyxes. Then I dipped them in boiling water to sanitise them and reattached the ones that wouldn't stay tied with toothpicks. Finally, I

hung them under the eaves of the house, and covered them with blue netting to keep the birds out.

I thought hoshigaki would be easier to make; all the other households seemed to manage fine. But dried persimmons demand labour and love. You can't hurry a persimmon. Even if they're just drying for three to five weeks, they must be gently massaged by hand for three to five weeks in order to soften the hard flesh, create a smooth exterior, and prevent wrinkles, moisture and mould from taking hold. The massage also pushes out any air pockets, and draws the natural sugars out to the surface. Drying persimmons doesn't work with a busy touring season: I forgot about them for a few days, during which it rained warm and wet, and when I did finally remember to check in I found mould, bruises and small clouds of black fruit flies. I flung them into the compost heap. I vowed to try again next year, armed with extra alcohol to sterilise the outsides, and we ate some store-bought hoshigaki instead. But the following autumn was busy and tense, and by then she had decided to quit her job and leave Japan. I've not tried to make them since.

■ ■

If I had to describe the sequence of events, it might go something like this: one and a half years after we began living together, she left the country to pursue another life. I assumed we would stay friends. I continued to write messages. I slowly stopped, assuming she was perhaps too busy to respond. I found out a few years later through a mutual friend that I had made the wrong assumptions.

Even now, I feel the urge to deflect, to write around the matter, to make light of it all. How trite, how inevitable! Who among us hasn't lost a friend or several? Or decided to shed one ourselves? We take turns becoming the one who leaves. We make ghosts of ourselves and the ones we once loved. Like seasons we change, we transition into the next life. We try and fail to forget. We grow, outgrow and are outgrown. But none of it ever, ever seems to hurt any less.

■ ■

I have often wondered what set us down this path, whether it was one event or a growing cascade of them, like waking up and realising the leaking roof has turned into a waterfall. Why hadn't I seen it coming? I ask myself what I missed, what I should have done, whether I could have been different.

If I had to point to something that may have marked the beginning of the end, maybe it's this episode:

She had recently left an ex-partner, fleeing for the exit. Stupidly, I failed to grasp the situation and the enormity of strength it had taken to leave him. Without thinking, I left a comment on one of his social media posts I found interesting and, with a directness that I still find remarkable, she brought this up to me in the kitchen: that I had hurt her by continuing to engage with him. I was horrified; I would have reacted the same way, been just as upset had someone done this to me, and yet I hadn't extended this same consideration to her. I had not been a loyal friend. I immediately apologised, deleted and blocked him, and we put it behind us at the time – but I've never forgotten it, and I'm not sure she has.

Or perhaps it began even earlier than that.

Perhaps it was doomed from the start, this entire situation with nonexistent work-life boundaries, too much time with each other and not even a separate desk from which to work. Informed by hindsight, now cohabiting with a partner, and additional years of remote working, there are many things I would have done differently. Have separate working spaces. Draw lines between employment and identity. See a psychiatrist. Attempt to compromise on levels of tidiness. Rely on her less as the nexus of my social life.

And yet, looking back at those years from the light of today, I wouldn't change a thing. More precisely, I wouldn't have said no to Kyoto. Neither laughter nor tears, heartache or joy: I wouldn't trade any of it.

■ ■

The second autumn was packed with work trips. There was no time to make much of this year's persimmon harvest, so I made

vinegar, because it was easy and required almost no attention. I pushed all the persimmons I could into a large crock, tied a piece of cheesecloth over it, and set it out on the engawa to breathe. Any and all will do: ripe or underripe, hard or soft, astringent or sweet. Variety makes for a more complex vinegar. Over the next few weeks, I stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon whenever I could, breaking down any pulpy bits. It took on a soft, fruity scent, and eventually began to fizz.

I was away for many weeks, so our landlord knew at least a month before I did that she had decided to leave. Any humiliation was quickly overtaken by shock, then sadness.

Sometime in early spring, I strained out the vinegar into several glass bottles and jars, pressing down on the pulp to extract as much liquid as possible. It had more body and presence than your average white wine vinegar. It was fragrant and effervescent, with an assertive sweet-tart flavour.

■ ■

Two years after I'd moved away from Kyoto, I had a brief email exchange with my former landlord, where he revealed that the persimmon tree had been cut down to make space for a studio. It made sense on a practical level. Space is precious in Japan; there shouldn't have been anything symbolic about it. And yet. It still felt like the definitive end of something – the tree I imagined would bear fruit every autumn for decades into the future was now gone.

I have rarely eaten persimmons since leaving that house. It has never felt quite right to buy them from a shop; they have neither the blemishes nor the beautiful, unruly shapes of the ones I'd watched grow on our tree. I don't know if she's heard of what happened to the tree.

It occurs to me, as I write these words, that I still have two bottles of persimmon vinegar in my pantry. They travelled with me to Tokyo in a large paper bag, and the vinegar is now a five year-old vintage, rust-coloured, rich and mellow. This is what I have left of the house, the tree, and of her.

Note

1 Covered shopping arcade.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart (I)

What I knew about Kyoto before moving here would have fit on a single sheet of A4 paper. It would include a jumble of half-remembered anecdotes haphazardly absorbed from university lectures: Heian aristocracy, the Tale of Genji, assassinations, the Lotus Sutra. I'd heard it was supposed to be the 'traditional' city, the 'opposite' of Tokyo. I vaguely recalled a few temples from previous visits. I had once matched on a dating app with an exchange student at one of the local universities.

When I moved here, the first thing I noticed was how small the city was. No skyscrapers, no highways looping spaghetti-like through town, no dense subway network. Instead, there were cyclists, mountains ringing the city, and the Kamogawa River. I would grow to love the river.

I wasn't used to living somewhere with so many bicycles. In fact, it wasn't like anywhere I'd ever lived. Next to all the green were muted shades of brown and grey where you'd expect colour. Not just wood but building materials in general – cedar, cork, plaster, stone, thatched roofs, bamboo, sand, woven straw, corrugated sheet metal. Even the Starbucks and 7-Eleven logos were dark brown in place of their usual colours.

Where there was beauty it was heartstopping: river banks festooned with cherry blossoms, a murmuring canal full of koi, a window covered with strings of persimmons drying in the sun. More often than not, beauty was at the periphery of the city. Much of downtown was its obverse, a world of concrete and plastic and parking lots where old houses once stood. It was an ever-present, disorienting see-saw between old and new, pristine and dilapidated, sometimes all in the space of a single street. A temple of weathered wood with a garden of raked stones next to a prefab house patchworked with sunburnt tin and plastic sheeting next to a newly-built souvenir shop, all cedar for that 'modern Japanese' look.

Kyoto was where I learned to look closely at things. At the veins of a golden ginkgo leaf, or the patterns of cracked stone paths. Tree

branches reminded me of neurons. I photographed dewdrops on moss, the bloom of black mould on the dusty white plaster walls at a temple. Everything was fresh and new, like being in love.

Moving here was not my idea. I had no idea what I was signing up for. But I said yes to this city.

■ ■

One of my earliest memories from Kyoto is of a tiny apartment without a shower. This was a few years before I moved to the city. At this point in my life, I was still adventurous enough to crash with strangers off the internet. I'd reached out to Z because his CouchSurfing profile said he studied at the university nearby and loved cooking. We bonded over food: he made us dinner in his minuscule kitchen, where most of the space was dedicated to condiments and ingredients. I loved how proud he was of his knife collection. He bathed at the gym and I walked to the sento nearby; in a few years this would close down, going the same way as hundreds of other public baths in the city.

I stayed with him a few more times before moving to Kyoto three years later. It was usually cold when I visited, cold enough that we fell asleep with our feet touching under the kotatsu. In time, he would graduate, buy a motorcycle, and develop rock-hard biceps from pulling rickshaws at Ninenzaka. He would become a chef, open a restaurant, then several more. When I asked him – half-jokingly – to introduce me to some nice boys, he'd say: *No fucking way, you're too smart. Boys here like dumb girls.* I knew this was supposed to be a compliment.

■ ■

Another early memory: I once crashed into an old man while cycling along the river. This was about eight years before I finally sought help: pre-medication I was incurably clumsy, with an astounding ability to trip over thin air. I didn't know it, but my brain was in constant flight or fight mode. It always had been. It would only get worse over the years. But at that moment, there was only an old man yelling at me, demanding to see a licence. Frightened,

and not realising bicycle licences didn't exist here, I bowed and apologised repeatedly. He eventually realised I wasn't Japanese and let me off with a scowl. I did not forget this.

■ ■

Most people I meet here assume I'm from Japan, but I'm neither Japanese nor from Kyoto. A fourth-generation Malaysian-Chinese whose country only came into existence in 1963, with little in the way of known family records before the 20th century, I descend from a group of people whose identity is predicated on movement and migration. Hakka people are a cultural subgroup of the Han Chinese, 客家人, 'guest people', and they are scattered across the world. I grew up itching to leave home. My outsidersness is built into my heritage.

This never encroached (much) on the day-to-day, but sometimes I was reminded that I lived in a city where many local families could trace their lineage back at least ten generations, if not many times more. For instance, a Shinto priest I met casually mentioned that his family had been here for a thousand years. Someone else regaled me with how inter-family feuds can stretch back centuries: some families might refer to one that's been going on since the war, but it's not World War II they're talking about – it's probably the Ōnin War (1467–1477) or the Sengoku period that begins just after, a century plus of near-constant civil war which officially ended in 1615. Privately, I'd crumble under the sheer weight of that much known ancestry. I didn't know any families involved in such rivalries, and it was probably just as well. I'd never have been able to keep a straight face.

■ ■

Until recently – perhaps the mid-2010s – accounts of being a foreigner² in Japan were dominated by white, usually male, Anglo-centric perspectives. (Alright, not *that* much has changed.) They talk about 'doing the gaijin nod when you see another gaijin on the street.' (No one has *ever* done this to me.) They talk about playing the 'gaijin card' to get out of sticky situations, like, say, pretending

not to speak any Japanese when they've forgotten to buy the correct ticket for the express train, so the hapless station attendant decides to let them go. There's a certain group of people (men) who drift through life here with the barest smattering of Japanese for decades, relying on their Japanese spouses (wives) to keep the cogs of daily life spinning; this will never be viable for me. I will never experience the minor celebrity of being a white person in rural Japan (on balance, much healthier for one's ego), nor will I ever be someone people approach and fawn over because they want to make foreign friends (eventually, I realised this was also better), nor will local people ever compliment my looks (there was always a small part of me that wished I was noticeably beautiful). Occasionally, people praised my excellent English. (Even in Japan, I can't avoid this!) I've been perceived as a Japanese woman in unexpected ways. For example, at a musical gathering, an older white man once turned to me and asked: *So whose wife are you?* It took a great deal of self-restraint not to slap him.

Oh, there are many upsides to looking like part of the racial majority. For example, I'll never be stopped and searched by the police, something that regularly happens to other migrants with more melanin than me. No one is ever too nervous to sit next to me on the train. I rarely receive the English menu. When I walk into a restaurant in rural Japan, the whole place will never fall silent, and no one will stare at me in fear of having to communicate in English, or worse, simply in fear of me. I will never have the size of my breasts loudly discussed in the onsen on the assumption I don't understand what's being said. I will (probably) never be complimented on my Japanese language abilities in the middle of a colonoscopy and then have to do the awkward social dance of demurring while the camera's still shoved up my arse. (*Oh no, my Japanese really isn't good at all! Anyway, do I have an ulcer or what?*)

When I first moved to Japan to work in retail, I took pleasure in concealing my foreignness. I'd worked hard to acquire these language skills, so being able to (mostly) escape detection felt like winning. After a while, however, it stopped being of benefit to me.

Not only did this society encourage blending in, but serving customers was another way I had to learn how to disappear, which only reinforced my propensity for passivity and avoiding confrontation. My time in this job was short – only three months – but it shaped me in ways I wouldn't be able to articulate for years. I would find it difficult not to smile even when I didn't feel like it. It would take me years to unlearn the compulsion to bend, to shrink myself, to bow in the face of other people's needs and desires. It would take many years for me to stop being a doormat.

One particular moment from this stint in retail has stayed with me. An older man with a ponytail – I later learned he was some famous celebrity here – had just walked into the shop where I was working, demanding a pair of glasses. My manager gestured at me to attend to him, so I walked up to him and asked what he was looking for. I couldn't hear him through the slurring; I asked him to repeat himself. He began to berate me: *What the fuck are you, stupid? Can't you hear what I said?* I froze. I stammered out an apology. He continued to yell. The whole store fell silent. I backed away, fled to the back of the shop, refused to come out. I'm ashamed to think of it now, but I couldn't stop crying.

From the back of the shop, I heard my manager explaining in deferential tones that I wasn't Japanese, that I might not have understood him. I heard him mutter *I didn't know she wasn't Japanese*, as though that would have made his screaming any better. I heard him flirting with my obviously foreign, tall, pretty French colleague.

I think of how I'd react now, if I were in the same situation. If I had the confidence and ability to wield honorific speech that I do now, perhaps I'd try channelling hyper-Japanese insolence: to be 慥無礼 in'ginburei; to draw yourself up and communicate all the disdain you can muster, with excessive politeness. (Crudely speaking, it's a bit like frostily disagreeing with someone in the UK by starting with 'with all due respect'.) I could bow deeply in a way that feigned respect. I could perform a very sarcastic dogeza, kneeling and touching my head to the floor in a dramatic show of

remorse. It's a satisfying thought. But the truth is that, faced with such raw belligerence, I might still choose to back away. There is no fight worth winning here. Even though I'm older, even though I know this is part of life in customer service, even though there is no longer feel any pressure to behave in the most Japanese of ways, the memory manages to bring tears to my eyes more than half a decade later, the mix of impotent rage and nausea still fresh in my throat.

Memories like this are probably why I lingered at my subsequent job for so long. It's a low bar, but my humanity was never questioned. I worked with people who valued my opinions. I was never infantilised for my gender. I had no idea that condescension and screaming shouldn't be the norm at most jobs. I feared – irrationally, but many fears aren't rational – that leaving for another job would lead me straight back to where I started, powerless in the face of raw anger and entitlement.

Note

[2](#) The politically correct way to refer to foreigners is 外国人 gaikokujin, or 'person from another country.' The more politically incorrect term is 外人 gaijin, which some consider discriminatory or a pejorative, depending on who uses it. 外人さん gaijin-san is used by some Japanese people in a bid to be polite, which is often well-intentioned but betrays a certain lack of awareness. Some in the foreign community use 'gaijin' to refer to themselves as a way of reclaiming the term.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

(II)

I acquired a favourite shotengai. Here, there was a third-generation tofu shop run by the K family, a couple in their 70s and her two sons in their 40s. A friend was writing an article on this shopping arcade, and enlisted my help as an interpreter to interview as many shop owners as possible. The tofu matriarch had a smile like a crinkled piece of silk. Their business would likely end with her sons. *No one's marrying them*, she said, gesturing at them.

■ ■

I first met Mr S in the same shotengai. He sold katsuobushi (dried, smoked bonito), and had the longest traceable lineage of anyone I personally knew in the city. His family served at the Imperial Palace for nine generations – in what capacity, he was never clear on – but his father finally quit in the 1950s to open a katsuobushi shop. By all accounts, the money was better than working for the royals. Mr S showed me photos of his beloved orange motorcycle: on Wednesdays, he took her out on road trips around the prefecture. Interviewing him and other people in this shopping arcade was when I realised I love having an excuse to ask people about their backstories, and this might be why I took to freelance journalism a few years later.

Long after the interview ended, I made a point of stopping by whenever I was in the area for a chat and to see Hiruko, his portly golden cat. He'd appeared on local TV many times for being the Greatest Feline Diva in West Japan, because he would only consume top-shelf, freshly-shaved fish flakes, kind of like only eating the finest Perigord truffles or beluga caviar. Pre-packaged fish flakes? Oh no, that was for mere housewives and would-be cooks. This cat waited for the *good* stuff. He often went prowling around the neighbourhood, but had an uncanny knack of returning at the precise moment Mr S began scraping wafer-thin curls off a block of his best katsuobushi.

■ ■

A house I cycled past every time I went down to the shotengai had a papier-mâché Tweety Bird hanging above an open door. There was a sign on the door painted in shaky but determined calligraphy: 女性禁止. Women Not Allowed. The door was always open, even in winter. Within the entrance were bags of rubbish. Once, I heard rowdy laughter emanating from its dark recesses.

■ ■

One of the most trivial things I discovered is that there wasn't a single ice cream in town that I liked enough to eat more than once. Not one! Not even the green tea soft serve at Tsujiri, which was way too sweet. There was a shop downtown selling nutty, potent kinako soft serve, and it could have been the exception, but the queues are always too long in the tourist-filled Gion.

I did, however, discover kakigori. The shaved ice was a revelation, nothing like the rough-hewn ais kacang at home that I'd never liked (although I missed good cendol). I loved these mounds of fine, fluffy ice flakes that melted like snowflakes. The ice was so free of impurities that any added flavours shone.

A single kakigori cost as much as a meal, so these were occasional treats: one saturated with a bitter matcha syrup, another enveloped in custard and caramel (but not enough of either). My favourite was a limited-edition one at a shop by a small canal: an impossibly enormous scarlet ice football soaked with a sweet-tart grape and red wine syrup. How it didn't topple over at the slightest touch of a spoon is a mystery. It was capped with peeled Pione grapes, concealing a heart of crushed graham crackers and cream cheese. I still think about it after all these years.

■ ■

Something else that's kind of trivial, but true: the water in Kyoto is delicious. Yes, having an opinion on drinking water of all things; isn't its potability enough? But it turns out the taste of water does improve the further you are from big cities, and the nearer you are

to the mountains. People in Kyoto attribute all their culinary successes to the water: the tofu is delicious because of the water, as are the local sake, vegetables, and tea. It's amazing how particular people were about their water sources. One tea person I met only used water from Mt. Atago in west Kyoto for their tea sessions. I wouldn't go to those lengths for water, but I do think soybean dishes like tofu and yuba generally taste better here than anywhere else in the country.

■ ■

I didn't grow up eating much bread; it was there, but eclipsed by rice, noodles, roti canai. Studying in London didn't change this. I never had a favourite bakery there, and I certainly never bought baguettes. But this changed when I moved to Kyoto. Although food never occupied her waking thoughts the way it did mine, my housemate had strong and particular opinions on bread, and so by dint of sharing a kitchen with her I came to appreciate a good baguette.

Every other week or so, if money wasn't too tight, she'd cycle 15 minutes south to a particular boulangerie for a proper baguette, with a crisp, crackly exterior and chewy interior. This cost the princely sum of ¥330, which adds up quickly if you love bread. Otherwise, we'd have a cheap batard loaf about half the price from the bakery five minutes away. It had the taste and consistency of lightly torched styrofoam, and was invariably so flabby the next morning it would need toasting to be at all edible.

Kyoto, I learned much later, has the second-highest number of bakeries per 100,000 people in Japan, out-breaded only by – of all places – Ehime prefecture. On average, Kyotoites also have the highest bread consumption by weight and yen spent per year. I was not surprised to discover that Kyoto and Paris are sister cities: they share a fascination for each other, they both once dictated the cultural mores in their respective nations, and they have a (mostly justified) reputation for aloofness and snobbery. There's even the annual Nuit Blanche Kyoto, a contemporary art festival inspired by the original Parisian event.

All the French people hang out at the artsy, annoyingly hip Cafe Independants downtown, my housemate said, with mild disdain in her voice.

■ ■

In truth, I wrote next to nothing about her in my journals during the Kyoto years, so there are many blank spaces where memories of the minutiae of our daily lives should reside. I remember those days in flashes, supplemented by the very few photos of us from back then. Sometimes I wonder if it was an assumption of permanence on my part. Back then, I rarely wrote about people I was sure of, whose presence I took as a given. I only wrote to capture what I thought I might lose. Afterwards, I couldn't write about her for a long time, because that would have meant admitting what I'd lost. It would have meant admitting that I'd lost.

■ ■

Some scenes from photographs that I've salvaged:

One of the first meals I had with her, at a cafe near the house we'd end up sharing. Her eyes are large as she twirls fresh tagliatelle around her fork. I can't remember why she's laughing – embarrassed that I'm snapping a photo, perhaps.

Here, she is grinning at a plate of messy, gloriously unpretty pancakes piled high with bananas, whipped cream, ice cream, marshmallows, caramel sauce and pecans. She is wearing a blue and white blouse, which makes her look like a slender porcelain vase.

A summer's night where we put on kabuki-themed face packs, transforming ourselves into masked stage performers. It was absurdly large on her face. The contrast between her small face and an outsized object would become a recurring motif: her holding up a piece of fried chicken half the size of her head, or wielding a massive daikon radish three times the length of her head.

After our first harvest, she stood at our tiny kitchen counter, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, scooping persimmon pulp into a bowl for jam. Eager to make the most of all the fruit rapidly ripening on the engawa, I dragged her into this jam-making scheme, which

she agreed to in the way you might indulge a small child. It turned out to be a laborious time suck. Later, I set Bob Marley's 'Jamming' to a short clip of persimmon jam bubbling on the stove. I suspect this may have been her idea.

One autumn evening, we walked out to the train crossing near our house. She had asked me to take a few photographs of her. Dressed in a dark blue kimono with a fur stole of the same colour draped around her, I remember thinking that she looked ethereal and terribly glamorous under the streetlights.

■ ■

But photographs never tell you the whole story. You can't feel how cold it was at the train crossing when you look at these photos, how our breath curled out of us in wisps. You can't smell the lingering twists of sharp lemon juice, or the roasted honey and mango fragrance of persimmon jam. You can't hear the particular cadence of her laugh.

And what about everything else, which only lives on in my mind? There are no photos of the kimchi-bacon deviled eggs I made for our housewarming party, where twenty people managed to cram themselves into our kitchen. (I can't even remember who turned up.) Nothing that captures the sound of her whisking a bowl of matcha in the morning, or how she would close her eyes and let out a mewl of pleasure when popping a truffle into her mouth. Her fondness for good cheese. How she normally had a bird-like appetite but almost always had space for ice cream. How I learned to speak to customers by listening in on her calls. The way she pedalled up a hill on her small black bike. Her face illuminated by the glow of her laptop as she tapped away from her futon under a duvet, while I worked from the kitchen table. The week she hummed Asa's 'Jailer' while answering emails. All the nights we spent working hours well beyond our pay. The fierce, invioluted energy she radiated at times, as though in defiance of everything life had thrown at her. That was the thing about her: she kept going. There aren't any photographs of that. No photo conveys how I loved and envied her way with people, and how I sometimes felt small and limited next to her.

It was a few weeks after I'd moved in and we were chatting at the kitchen table late one night. I'd been describing a different friendship that had ended the previous summer, first eroding slowly, then all at once. It still rankled at the time, and I hadn't found it in me to forgive the other person yet.

We'll never let anyone do that to you again, she said softly, hugging me.

There is no photograph of this moment, either.

■ ■

Early winter nights here were brisk and clear, a few starry pinpricks visible on a sky of darkest indigo. It wasn't quite cold enough yet to wear my woollen hat to bed. Sound travels further as the temperatures drop, and the melody of our neighbour's bamboo flute was clearest in the winter months. Its solemn, lingering notes were almost like the mountain singing to itself.

The Art of Tour-Guiding

You keep the corners of your mouth turned up for Smile No. 1, I'd tell them. That's the one you wear in the shop. When you're talking to customers, that smile gets a little bigger in Smile No. 2, and the corners of your eyes crinkle. Smile No. 3 – I'd plaster on my brightest grin – is where you show your teeth, when you're thanking them. And during our training, there was a game where the trainers called out numbers – One! Three! Two! Three! – and we'd switch our faces to the correct smile.

I'm standing in the lobby of a hotel in downtown Kyoto. I've outlined the day's itinerary, so I'm telling my customers a story to kill time before our taxis arrive. This particular anecdote about staff training at a major retailer in Tokyo usually goes over well: shocked laughter, and a palpable change in atmosphere. Tell a story, chip away at some of the tension. That's how I've learned to start my tours.

My goodness, I can't believe it, one customer says.

I know, right? I laugh. Would've preferred Chanel No. 5 over Smile No. 1!

They laugh, but they never notice I'm always wearing this smile around them.

■ ■

Before the pandemic, I'd spent almost half of my twenties being a part-time tour guide in Kyoto. This hadn't been on my list of possible careers when I moved to Japan in 2015. In fact, I'd wager few people ever dream of becoming a guide. It's the sort of job you stumble into when figuring out how to earn money whilst travelling, or when you're worn out by your current work, and looking for something different and less soul-sapping.

I did the latter, trading a retail job in Tokyo for a remote job in Kyoto at a travel company. The job consisted of answering emails from customers who wanted the tours we sold. Though it was far less soul-crushing than Japanese retail, soon enough I began to look

for any chance to escape the endless stream of emails arriving at my rickety kitchen table. This is how I began leading walking tours in spring and autumn.

Most of the tours I led for this company over four years followed the same two-day itinerary in Kyoto, identical except for minor variations in timing and choice of restaurant. This means I have visited the Golden Pavilion at least 50 times, which is about 49 times more than anyone should ever have to endure, especially with thousands of jostling tourists alongside. I recall, with a mixture of awe and respect, the colleague who did this in a single year without a hint of resignation. By contrast, I was already wishing by the third year that the temple had never been rebuilt after it last burned down in 1950.

Another place I grew to dislike was Ryoan-ji, a Zen temple famed for its rock garden. The rock arrangements are supposed to facilitate meditation, but in spring and autumn it feels about as contemplative as an ice cream shop. Try finding a tranquil moment when everyone behind you is clumping along the narrow engawa towards the gift shop. Arashiyama was even worse. Don't be taken in by photos that show its famous bamboo forest as a people-free piece of paradise, unless you're willing to wake up at 5am when no-one else is around. None of these places were designed for the sheer volume of visitors to Kyoto today.

Still, I enjoyed leading these tours at first. I liked my customers, many of whom would have read at least one of the suggested books in our pre-tour materials. On our tours, I would highlight the use of borrowed scenery in the Silver Pavilion's garden design, discuss the differences between Buddhism and Shintoism, delve into the history of temple cuisine. An undergraduate degree in Japanese and art history is not directly relevant to most office jobs, but it was perfect for part-time tour guiding. I considered myself very lucky.

■ ■

I was a tour guide, which meant to my customers that I was also a historian, lecturer, personal shopper, interpreter, babysitter, waitress, friend, walking encyclopaedia, personal sat-nav, emergency

medic, restaurant critic, negotiator of favours, therapist, peacemaker, secretary, entertainer, and on longer tours with people thrice my age, surrogate granddaughter.

I was 23, and it was only my second 'real' entry-level job. This put me in a peculiar position. Guiding is a service job, but my older, wealthier customers deferred to me as an expert on a country and culture that wasn't even mine. I felt like I hadn't earned the right to this job. I knew more than they did, but less than they thought I did, and it took a while to get used to lecturing groups of senior citizens.

A two-day tour cost upwards of \$800 per person; it has only become more expensive since. Most of that went towards exorbitant hotel rates and business overheads. I earned less than half that figure per tour. I routinely carried several hundred dollars in cash to pay for tickets and taxis. I tried not to think too deeply about how I was providing a service I couldn't afford.

■ ■

We refer to the measure of our work as 'job performance,' which strikes me as darkly appropriate. Originating from the Anglo-French 'performer' and the Old French 'parfornir', to perform is to fulfil what is required, to accomplish a task. In the theatrical sense, it is also to act, to represent, to put on a show. I think of modern work as being true in both senses. It is rarely enough to do the work itself: we also perform versions of ourselves within the bounds of acceptability for our employers, our customers, to anyone bearing witness.

Leading tours was, I discovered, all about performance. It's no coincidence we're sometimes known as tour conductors, directing an orchestra with an ever-changing cast of players and a hundred possible hiccups along the way. I was the face of this drama, the only person the customer would meet, but like any film or musical there was a vast crew of people behind the scenes. The lead-up to a tour involves a dizzying web of logistics: securing hotel rooms, emails, faxes, phone calls, booking taxis, scheduling guides, checking for insurance and pre-existing medical conditions, printing

and posting tour materials, booking experiences, more emails, more faxes, more phone calls.

I felt like a magician at times, sailing on the hard work of the backstage team, presenting the sights of this city as though they were cards up my sleeve. Preparation, practice, sleight of hand. Even delight was scripted: it was practically written into our tour manuals. We'd check to see if a customer's birthday would be happening on tour, and if it was we'd order cake or plan something special. On some level, the customers knew it was part of our job to engineer joy, but they seemed touched nonetheless. Everyone loves a surprise birthday cake.

■ ■

When I began, I was no storyteller. I'm an introvert. I prefer listening. Tours demanded otherwise, so I constructed a funnier, wittier version of myself. I practised easily-digestible answers to the inevitable 'Why Japan?'; I wore huge flowers in my hair and bright orange jackets to stand out in the crowds; I faked a confidence I didn't feel. A friend defines guiding as 'edu-tainment,' a hideous yet apt portmanteau for what our job entails. Ostensibly, I was imparting knowledge, but I was also performing a narrative of Kyoto – and by extension Japan – that had been constructed through this itinerary, a curated list of experiences and sights that acted as a shorthand for this city.

As guides, we were partly responsible for shaping how our customers perceived Japan. Many were interested in specific aspects of Japanese culture, like gardens or traditional crafts. Some came for authenticity – itself a perilously nebulous concept – and to see a side of Japan inaccessible without an insider. I wasn't Japanese, which probably disappointed more than a few customers, but I made up for it with anecdotes from my past life in Tokyo.

Some people, I learned, prefer not to be disabused of their image of Japan; not everyone wants to know it has as many problems as their own countries. If they wanted to hear about my experience of working at a Japanese company, I'd tell them about learning how to bow – the trick is to bow from the hip, not from

your neck – but not how corporate training was a form of hazing designed to break you.

I cribbed stories from my colleagues, taking notes on their delivery. The Japanese creation myth is a delicate one to relate, involving a pair of gods who were siblings *and* married. I've never been able to narrate it like my Italian colleague does, perfectly deadpan with just the right amount of eyebrow-wagging that had customers doubling over in laughter. Instead, I received raised eyebrows and awkward silences. But you move on: I'd bring out these stories one after another, a constant stream of anecdotes that dried up the moment I went home and crawled into bed.

Back then, I didn't consciously think of this work as performance; on the contrary, I was earnest about wanting to please, and took pride in providing the sort of service expected of me. It felt like a minor achievement when I managed to remember everyone's names within the first ten minutes. Every tour was the same, but at the same time no tour was. Each would throw up its own small catastrophes, and I would feel an acute sense of accomplishment after finishing a tour without mishaps: no taxis missed, no customers lost, no heart attacks or heat strokes. But I was often convinced they hadn't liked me, though I would hear otherwise from my managers.

■ ■

Questions I have been asked: *What are these statues and why do they have hats on them? What kind of stone are we standing on? Are geishas prostitutes? Can you explain Zen? How much does a house in this neighbourhood cost? What cardinal direction are we facing now? Why is there a chicken on the roof? Can Japan have empresses? What was the economy of Japan like in the 1800s? Did samurai take multiple wives? Why is your English so good? Have you dated Japanese men? Where can I buy this chair?*

There are no stupid questions, we assured our customers.

■ ■

I enjoyed guiding. I loved revisiting certain places, like the tearoom and the moss-covered temple. Guiding took me away from emails. I liked observing customers on holiday, and on rare occasions even became friends with them afterwards. I was paid in cash, which helped on a low salary. Most of all, it allowed me to assume the role of someone confident and self-assured. It remains one of the only jobs I've had where older white men have paid for the privilege of my time and knowledge, and have consistently deferred to my authority without contradicting me.

Whether I understood this consciously or not, it was invaluable in bolstering my sense of self. It was also an ideal distraction: I could pretend I was somebody when I was nobody, I could lose myself for days at a time focusing on making other people happy, and forget about the crushing anxiety and self-loathing that resurfaced when I returned to my desk job.

I often wondered if anyone was fooled.

■ ■

I was lucky: unpleasant customers were few and far between on my tours.

(Every guide has a story about the customer who tries to have you fired; mine was a bratty socialite with a penchant for horse-racing.)

What amazed me was the transformation some people underwent on tour. Otherwise intelligent and competent adults switched off the moment the tour started: I was suddenly responsible for where they walked, what they ate, how to communicate. They would forget to look both ways when crossing the street, their attention snagging on every cherry blossom tree. Strangely pliant and wide-eyed, relying on you to gently shepherd them to their next destination – *like herding cats*, my colleagues grumbled – they were free from the burden of choice, free to delight in the mundane details of daily life in Japan.

Honestly, said a colleague. You're just there to make sure they don't get run over by a car.

■ ■

It takes a certain kind of person to join a tour lasting longer than, say, a day or two. A person willing to cede control over their lives, subject themselves to the company of strangers for one, even two weeks. Their glass is half-full, they stake their time and sanity on the possibility of pleasure and new experiences. They let someone else take the reins. They drop their masks, reinvent themselves, behave in ways they wouldn't back home.

An opportunity to make new friends, a guide told me, *means you can also meet new enemies*. What do you do with a group of liberal New Yorkers and Southern Republicans for two weeks? Or a group of people, half of whom are as punctual as the Germans, and half of whom regularly show up late? Another friend had the misfortune of spending two weeks with a divorced couple who had decided to forge ahead with the holiday they'd booked before things went sour. She became an unwilling mediator, the person to whom grievances about the ex-partner were aired.

I remember a particular tour on which I had three participants: all women, two of whom were old friends travelling together. The woman joining solo had long flyaway hair, an absent, dreamy smile, and a sigh like a balloon slowly deflating. Most customers in a group tour usually try to get along, but not her. Her gaze slid over the other two as if they simply did not exist; instead she focused her attention on me in a way I found at once endearing and unnerving.

That she was moved by many of the places we visited was clear: she sighed whenever I described something poignant, like moon-watching gatherings, or the story of the dancing girl who renounced the world and spent her remaining days in a temple. One of the two friends, a woman with the aura of an ex-school teacher, had taken an obvious dislike to her, and by the end of the first day was scowling at every sigh.

The two friends took me out for dinner that night, and the one who had taken offence began tabulating the faults of the other woman.

See, when you join a tour, there's a social contract, right? By joining, you agree to be pleasant to the other participants for the duration of the tour. It's just basic manners.

I nodded, made some noncommittal noises.

She didn't even acknowledge me, she said, turning to her friend for confirmation. She hasn't said a single word to you either.

Thoroughly aggrieved and confused by the woman's complete lack of interest in engaging in pleasantries, she seemed like a toddler who had had their bedtime routine disturbed. I couldn't disagree with the facts, but validating her feelings about another customer was out of the question. And, despite the perceived rudeness, I secretly admired her freedom to reject these social rituals, a luxury I couldn't afford in this role.

I put on Smile No. 2 and steered the conversation towards dinner.

■ ■

The longer I was in this job, the less certain I became of where the guide ended and where I began. I found myself slipping into 'guide mode' with friends, deciding where to eat, pouring their drinks, launching into explanations of things around us, and then resenting their lack of initiative. Traits that served me well in my job – an endlessly sunny disposition, an instinct to anticipate needs and gloss over contentious topics – proved disastrous for real-life relationships, and I'd resent the other person for refusing my attempts to please them.

Don't customer me, my partner said impatiently when we began dating. *Tell me what you want. I don't need to be entertained.* My first reaction was to smile and change the subject. It took me years to lose that smile.

Then there were the tours themselves. These were the golden years of pre-pandemic inbound tourism, and I was beginning to loathe the places we visited: Arashiyama, with its permanently crowded bamboo forest; the dozens of buses at Nijo Castle that disgorged swarms of tourists trailing frazzled tour conductors. *Like*

fucking Disneyland, groused a colleague. I began to hate the job, but took every tour I could.

The tours in Kyoto had begun to feel like a long-running Broadway show. Why did I continue for as long as I did? Perhaps a reluctance to leave a job where I felt useful and confident. I needed the money. It held a certain measure of social capital: a non-office job, in Japan of all places. I held out in the naïve, secret hope I would make enduring friendships.

■ ■

One of my last tours consisted of a group of friends: all couples, with the exception of the woman who had organised the trip. She was bookish, quiet, and watchful. I liked her immediately. As she was alone, I would sit next to her on train rides. She scribbled down everything I said into a palm-sized notebook, and I remember feeling guilty I had nothing more insightful to say.

On the last train ride back, she told me about her box of journals filled with notes from travels to Japan. She was writing her memoirs, but doubted anyone would ever read them. With an exception in her early youth, she had always lived alone; her dog, her only companion during the last 14 years, had died the year before. An enormous sorrow washed over me as she gazed out of the window, tears trickling down her face. I remember the curve of her shoulders as I hugged her. Later, I went home to my partner and cried into his shoulder.

I resigned two months before the world went into lockdown. My reasons were not especially profound: I left because I could no longer put my heart into this performance. I haven't led a tour since, and I don't know if I'll ever feel entirely safe leading them again. But it's the kind of job that never leaves you. Occasionally, I miss being the magician, the person who puts a smile on someone's face. I miss the light in their eyes when we've seen something unexpected and delightful. I miss meeting new people. I miss the feeling of competence, of feeling like I was needed, if only for a few days.

Some Small Dive

My second home in Kyoto was a little jazz kissaten by the river. It was the kind of place you'd have to be looking for to walk into – eight seats at a counter and a wall of records behind the chairs. Old-fashioned lamps hung low, yellowing photos and posters dotting the walls and ceiling. Fresh flowers on the counter, tchotchkes and bric-a-brac everywhere. It was the kind of space you would dream of in monochrome. Open the door and a wave of music swept over you, louder than conversation, sending shivers thrumming through your spine.

I don't remember how I first ended up here. I must have ordered coffee. It would have come with a thimble-sized pitcher of cream, and I'd have dribbled a few droplets into the coffee, watched white tendrils coil through the black. Secondhand smoke and jazz would have swirled around me: Ella, Louis, Dizzy, Billie. I probably drank so slowly the coffee was cold halfway down the cup. And it must have gotten under my skin, because I went again. Every other week, then every week, sometimes even twice a week. Thus began my affair with this small dive.

Behind the counter are T and M, the middle-aged couple who run this kissa. He makes the coffee and selects the records; she makes most of the other food and drink. There is a companionable silence between the two, as happens with people who have been married for decades and spend all their time together. Lately their son, who's nearing the end of his twenties, has been working with them; he is affable but quiet, and reveals little about himself. His twin K is his obverse, reminding me a bit of a bright-eyed chipmunk. She's an enviable free spirit in a rigid society – shaving her head, dabbling in everything from therapeutic massages to indigo dyeing, tending to a vegetable garden on a plot of rented land nearby. I can't remember how or why this began, but we once got into a meow-off with each other, and now we meow at each other instead of saying hello.

Neither T nor M are especially talkative. T is the quieter of the two. He usually sits next to the record player, and you can often hear him humming slightly tunelessly along to whatever's playing. He also hums while pouring coffee. When the place is empty, he'll sit at the counter and read the newspaper; I like that he still reads newspapers. M does most of the talking with regulars, nodding sympathetically at their updates on neighbourhood gossip. I rarely know who the characters in their dramas are or what they're complaining about, but I like it best when someone has gone and done something so unfathomably foolish that she'll say in her lilting Kyoto accent: *Honma, aho ya na. Seriously, what an idiot.*

Once a staple of early- to mid-twentieth century Japan, kissaten are a dying style of coffeehouses. You'll know one when you see one: it's usually dimly lit, with a distinct whiff of eau de ashtray, populated with dark wood furniture, maybe red velvet or leather seats. The coffee ranges from rich to burnt. The kissa is a relic, as retro as penny candy, the antithesis of brightly-lit modern cafes with light-coloured furniture and pop soundtracks.

The jazz kissa is an even rarer species: these kissa were places people once went to listen to the latest jazz records and, in some of them, enjoy live jazz. Personal music devices have more or less obliterated a practical need for cafes like this. Nevertheless, a few kissa persist. There is nothing like being by yourself at a jazz kissa, sipping coffee in companionable silence with other strangers.

There are people on this planet who dislike kissaten. Like my partner, whose chief complaints include the dim lighting (but that's the point), cigarette smoke (fair), and the coffee, which for him would make great drain cleaner. Those who love kissaten, *love* kissaten. I once chatted to a British chef – married to a Japanese woman – about kissaten. Dark interiors, burnt coffee, like *really* burnt, furniture from another era, old-school ambience – he adored it all. He stared at me intently, and said, *When my wife first brought me to a kissaten, I told her, girl, you've got to be fucking kidding me, I mean, what the fuck is this? But we've been married for over ten years now, and let me tell you, I get it, I really do.*

What did I love about my little dive in Kyoto? That it was a short cycle from where I lived. That it was near the river. I liked their impeccable taste in jazz. Watching them brew coffee. Each cup was made to order: every now and then you'd hear the discordant whizz of T grinding beans at the end of the counter, then tipping them onto filter papers. It was mesmerising, watching M's wrists rise and dip as she dribbled hot water onto the grounds, steam curling up as she did so. I didn't like sitting next to smokers, but I did enjoy watching their cigarette smoke swirl and spiral around their heads. I loved the pause between records, the brief intermission where you could clearly hear the rest of the kissa – the sound of running water, sizzling oil in the pan, or the most mundane reminiscences about the past, like how there used to be a shoe repair shop on Horikawa that was completely gone now, and how shoes these days were pasted together with glue, while back then you had to fix them properly or it was no good – and then the sound of the record spinning, that moment just before the music started again. I also liked that people rarely sat up straight here. Maybe it's a particularly modern affliction, but so many people here had rounded shoulders, like cats. They'd lean back, slump into the chair, look down at their phones, prop their elbows on the table (okay, that was me), but never, ever was there anyone with excellent posture.

Conversation was never loud enough to detract from the music, which always came first here. If people talked, they kept their voices low. Most customers nursed a drink and stared into space, enveloped by a bubble of jazz. Brubeck, Davis, Django, Grappelli. Some read their books or, less often, fiddled with their phones. I'd come here to read or scribble in a notebook, back when I used to keep a journal. It always felt like evening or night inside the kissa, even in the middle of the day.

Over time, I came to know who the regulars were, at least by sight. I'm almost certain they were all unattached. A weeknight was a good time to be here if you wanted to eavesdrop on the regulars, especially Mondays, because who else goes to a tiny jazz kissa on a Monday evening except people with no other family to go home to? Everyone came alone. The regulars were largely men in their forties

to seventies, although there were also a few women, and most of them seemed to live nearby – right around the corner, I fancied. The atmosphere relaxed whenever it was mostly regulars around; it loosened its tie and sprawled into a happy stupor. On one of those evenings, a sneeze exploded out of me, taking me and everyone else by surprise. We all laughed. The grey-haired man next to me leaned back, musing: *When a young girl sneezes it's cute, but when an old fart like me sneezes, people look at you like you're shit.*

A few regulars stand out in my memory. There was Yuki-chan, with her silver hair in two braids, always dressed in white like she'd just stepped out of a Muji catalogue, knocking back sake and whiskey on the rocks as though she was twenty. Taciturn Mr K, the saxophonist, had been coming here for decades. A grizzly, curly-haired man I mentally nicknamed The RapsCALLION, whom I never liked on account of his mild sleaziness and tendency to lean too close to any young woman he sat next to, which once included me. I flinched, glared at him, scooted closer to Yuki-chan on my right. *Don't mind him, girl,* she said. The next time I saw him in the kissa, he commented loudly to someone else: *She doesn't like me.* I scowled at him. *Honma, aho ya na.*

I loved listening to the regulars gossip and grumble. Once, during typhoon season, a few of them grouched about the weather for half an hour. And the tourists – oh, did they complain about all the tourists in Kyoto. *Jeez, so many tourists. They're everywhere, aren't they?* I'd occasionally join in if I'd had a particularly gruelling tour: *Seriously, Arashiyama was so crowded yesterday.*

You know that TeamLab event at Shimogamo Shrine? A man with streaks of grey in his hair and a tired-looking suit jacket slung over his chair had begun his rant. *Masses of idiots lining up for Instagram photos.*

Yeah, people with too much time on their hands, replied the man next to him. *I saw one of them just now.*

The man with the jacket was about to respond when his phone rang. He glared at it and stomped out of the cafe to take the call. When he returned a few minutes later, he slumped back in his chair

and sighed happily. *Ah, I've returned to paradise. I miss the days of pagers when people couldn't bother you whenever they pleased.*

It must have been about ten months after my first visit that they accepted I wasn't going anywhere. Perhaps it was when M commented on the lack of flowers in my hair – I'd ruined my favourite hairpiece that day – or when she remarked: *How rare, you don't usually have cocoa.* Most likely, it was when I plucked up the nerve to ask what the brown bits of paper were on the back wall and she asked: *Oh, would you like one?* They were coffee tickets: a single cup of coffee cost ¥500, and a sheaf of 11 tickets cost ¥5,000. All the regulars had their own, taped to the wall at the back of the shop, and each time they ordered a coffee she would tear one off the accordion of tickets along the dotted lines. I wrote my name at the top, and she put mine up next to the others. The coffee tickets were a commitment, a promise I'd be coming back. I was a regular now and quietly acknowledged as such. Such a small thing, but it felt huge. It felt like I'd finally arrived in Kyoto.

I'd never been a regular anywhere before this, nor had I intended to become one at the beginning. Although I'm a creature of habit, I'd never been to a restaurant or cafe with enough frequency before to become a known quantity. In a big city, there's always someplace new to try, an endless proliferation of third spaces opening and shutting down. This was the first time I'd liked somewhere enough to forgo trying other new places. It was also small and intimate enough that I could be casually known. I had no family in Kyoto, and no friends I saw regularly outside of work. I found it difficult to make close friends, but I could manage showing up at a cafe. There was a pleasing predictability to coming here, and over time it would become as familiar as my own futon. It could feel like hanging out in a friend's living room, especially when they threw in little treats – loquats from a neighbour's tree, egg-cakes from their holiday down south – and in return I started bringing edible souvenirs from work trips to share.

In the beginning, I documented it: surreptitious photos of the interior, moody shots of people in the lambent light of the cafe,

pages and pages in my journal trying to pin down what it was I loved about this place. I shared the occasional photo on Instagram, location left deliberately untagged, accompanied by earnest, heartfelt captions.

Over time, a sharp, quiet voice inside me grew louder about the perils of existing on social media, of trying to monetise your personal life to jumpstart your career. Wasn't it inevitable that people would ask where this place was? Why write about it at all, if I didn't want this to be known?

Not everything needs to be for public consumption; some things can be yours alone. This seems so obvious now, but it was difficult to internalise as someone whose instinct was to share, to over-explain, to help if asked. What reined in my instincts then was the desire to hide: to keep the sanctity of 'my' space intact, to avoid unexpected encounters with anyone from my 'real' life. We all have our own corners of the earth we run to.

I spent hours in my kissa, reading, writing, drifting in and out of a sea of jazz and quiet banter. Thelonious, Chet, Bill, Coltrane. I came here when I felt like dissolving from sheer loneliness – not because the kissa could fill the hole inside, but because it was better to feel lonely in a place I loved, surrounded by people I didn't really know and who didn't know me, but saw me nonetheless and cared. I felt cared for in a way that felt expansive and often unexpected, though there were also times when that well-meaning tenderness magnified the sheer impossibility of being understood. Mr K once remarked: *A lonely face doesn't suit you.* At moments like these I always felt the huge gulf between here and my life outside the cafe: how could I possibly explain my visa worries to someone who had never lived outside of Kyoto, or spoke any language other than Japanese? Or that I was crying about losing the first person I'd trusted and relied on in this city? It didn't matter. I nodded, and felt better knowing his comment came from a place of concern.

After moving away from Kyoto, I've come back every few months for work trips, visiting the cafe during my spare moments. The kissa anchors my 'rounds' around the neighbourhood, as I keep circling

back to old haunts. I go back slightly changed each time: a little older, my hair longer and black instead of pink, a different pair of glasses on my face. They are older too, their faces a little more weathered each time I see them. But the moment I walk through the door always feels like coming home. *Oh hey, we haven't seen you in a while.* When I sit down I feel the ghosts of my younger self settling on me like layers of a collage.

Home has always been a shifting reference point, a no-man's swaying sea of sand. Home has always been where I once was, and wherever I'm coming back to. There's a Japanese idiom, 住めば都 sumeba miyako, loosely 'home is where you decide it is'. I go home to Tokyo, London and KL, but in all of them I'm really returning to a version of a city I knew. Old haunts, old habits, old memories. Matcha ice cream on a side street. Chicken rice at this corner kopitiam. A beloved park and its squalling swans. In Kyoto, I'm always coming home to this kissa.

Everyone should be so lucky to have a place of their own, to be a regular somewhere. Nothing is constant – the city keeps changing, and it feels like a matter of time before this place goes. Until then, I hope it will always feel like coming home.

Besides, I still have some coffee tickets to use up.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

(III)

Officially, Kamogawa is written 鴨川, or 'wild duck river,' but this only applies to the river southwards of Imadegawa-dori, where the east and west branches merge into a single river. The western Kamo branch is written with the characters 加茂, in reference to the Kamo clan, whose roots stretch back as far as the Yayoi period³. People live their lives on the river: reading, practising their musical instruments (violins, saxophones, shamisen, trumpets), running, dancing, drinking tea. Where the branches merge was my favourite stretch.

At this confluence of two rivers, black kites perched on streetlights and telephone lines. They drifted on the air currents above, swooped down to steal my rice balls, disappeared into the canopy of the primaevial forest nearby. Egrets and grey herons eyed me suspiciously if I tiptoed closer. The son of a family I took on a private tour one summer was an amateur ornithologist, and I frequently heard half-exasperated, half-affectionate grumbles from the others – *There he goes again* – as he whipped out his camera for yet another sighting. This is how I began to notice more waterfowl: mallards, northern pintails, spot-billed ducks, northern shovelers, little grebes.

I loved the view from the bridge over this delta, the partial view of the misty mountains encircling Kyoto. It shifted with the seasons, the time of day, but it always made my heart twist. Here, the bowl of the sky was all around you. The mountains were shades of blue, aquamarine fading to palest iceberg. Other times they were purple, or more forbidding greys. They were always the colours of distance. A dream on the edge of memory, one that might disappear if you looked too closely.

■ ■

A sunny spring afternoon on the banks of the Takanogawa. I'd been in Kyoto for ten months or so. I was with a group of people I don't even remember now, everyone dressed in purple to commemorate Prince's death. A dozen people, several bottles of wine, and not a single bottle opener between all of us, so I called out to a couple walking past: *Hey, would y'all happen to have a wine bottle opener?* By some miracle they had two in their bag, and they joined our group for a little while.

I immediately adored N, with her bright, open smile and neon purple hair. I learned she had been a professional dancer, left that world for software engineering, then joined the circus while still working in tech. She dressed like she'd invented colour. She lived five minutes down the road. She and her partner loved coffee, food, and jazz. N was the first friend I made here who showed me a glimpse of a future in which it was possible to not conform to regular white-collar expectations and still live a full, meaningful life. And she was the first friend in this city I hadn't met through my housemate.

She split her time between Kyoto and other places. When she was here I felt happier, more anchored. She helped me feel like I had a reason to be here.

That same afternoon, I was describing my job to someone who asked about it. How I ended up here, my work in this particular travel company, the emails I wrote, the walking tours I sold and occasionally got to go on.

You don't sound very enthusiastic about your job, she said. *Are you sure you like it?*

I blinked at this question, face growing hot. I stammered out a reply I can't remember. Later I saw that her question was casually, devastatingly insightful in the way only strangers can be. (Isn't this what people pay therapists for?) I hadn't even recognised how tedious I found my work. I tried to sell her a story, but she noticed all the plot holes, all the things left unsaid.

■ ■

Even early on, there were signs that I wasn't a good fit for regular employment. I have always struggled with mornings, and this was no different as a working adult; my late starts were, I think, an endless source of frustration for my housemate.

I've not known anyone who's had a job who wakes up at midday, she once snapped.

(It was past 10am that day, but that is beside the point.)

In practice, the hours we kept wouldn't have mattered as long as the work was done, but I felt *some* pressure to be a good employee. To compensate for my late starts, I often worked overtime, as if this would prove my worth and utility. We were often glued to our laptops late into the night, engrossed in paid work or side projects.

I don't think either of us had thoroughly considered the implications of living with your coworker on a full-time basis, with only a central kitchen space as an office. How many friendships survive that kind of strain? The pandemic has prompted society-wide conversations about navigating the difficulties of working remotely from homes we share with loved ones, but this wasn't true back then. We had no frame of reference, no models of success. But we were young, and had good intentions.

■ ■

If you had asked me if I was happy, I would have shrugged, although the correct answer would have been to smile and nod. I had a job. I lived in a beautiful city. I travelled. I was aspiring towards happiness – I wanted to believe I was happy, because there was no real reason not to be, and there were just enough glimpses of actual joy to convince me that I was simply not trying hard enough. If I looked happy it would amount to the same thing, even if only for brief moments. I tried for gratitude, but I found fear. I had no idea what I was doing in Japan. I could not reconcile who I was with the life I felt compelled to present online.

Sometimes I would pray: *Please don't let me fuck this up. Please let me keep this. Please don't leave.*

Now I can put a name to the undercurrent of dread that had lurked below the surface for years, whose dams would break from time to time and flood my limbs with terror. I suspected then, but didn't believe I needed or deserved help. That would take a few more years.

In my dreams, I ran along never-ending corridors and staircases without an exit.

■ ■

One midsummer evening, I was walking along Rokkaku-dori with my camera for a photography project, when I spotted an old woman in a green dress. She was tiny and shoeless, tiptoeing in maroon socks to adjust the electricity meter next to the door of her house. I raised my camera, took a photo of her from the back. And then she saw me, beckoned me over when our eyes met. I was wearing my bright orange haori – not many people wear them – so I was accustomed to old Japanese ladies examining me. She squinted at the sleeve, fingered the material. My first impression was of someone highly critical.

Come on in, she said. I'll make you a cup of tea. I'm all alone, anyway.

I removed my shoes, clambered in, knelt down at the table. The fluorescence of the single overhead lamp made the house feel darker. She shuffled slowly to the back, rummaged in a box, returned with a sweet, a bowl for tea.

Yamaguchi-san was 104 years old. *No one believes it, she said.* People thought she looked like 80. She was old, but her mind was still working; she hadn't gone senile yet. Next month she would turn 105.

I'd never talked to anyone this old. I barely understood her. It was a little like talking to my grandmother, except I could never speak Hakka worth a damn, and my Japanese was far better than my Chinese, Cantonese, or Hakka. I could discuss tax deductions and visas, but my language degree did *not* prepare me for conversing with centenarians. Her speech wasn't just Kyoto dialect,

it was *old* dialect, made even less intelligible by her cracked, faded voice.

You have to eat the sweet before the matcha, she said. But for sencha you eat it after. Sweet before matcha and after sencha.

Mou... Didn't you learn how to do this in school? Bow first. Pick up the bowl – not like that. One hand. Like this, and the other hand comes below. You turn it twice – no, not like that. You lift it up. Yes. Now drink. You need practice.

I wished I could record her endless stream of sentences, so I could play it back to try and decipher what she was saying. Later, I looked up words like 'sakai-ni' which turned out to be an old way of saying 'because,' and 'o-keiko,' referring to her tea lessons and practice.

I looked Japanese to her, but wasn't. I spoke Japanese, but my parents didn't. This puzzled her. She told me she once had a sister. She gave me her phone number, scrawled vertically in shaky handwriting on a piece of paper I've now lost. She made me write down my name, and then peered above her spectacles at what I'd written.

What's this? Katakana? You have a strange name. Ah, you can pass for a Japanese. You came over here, you should just live as a Japanese. Let's call you Akiko. Ii yo ne? Akiko.

Akiko. To her, that's who I was.

As I left, she told me to go straight home, to make sure I didn't slip and fall, that Kyoto wasn't how it used to be, that it was dangerous out there these days. She told me to take care, and come by again for a cup of tea.

■ ■

My life has felt like one long episode of constant code-switching. I have always wanted to become someone else. Growing up, I toggled between different modes of English and barely-conversational Chinese (I adopted a 'mainland' accent around my Chinese friends instead of my twangy Malaysian-Chinese speech) and Malay (I've been told that I sound like orang putih). Then came Japanese, and now I could include Kansai dialect in that mix.

Strictly speaking, Kansai-ben is a group of dialects in the Kansai region, recognisably similar to each other but with regional variations. My first encounter with it up close was when I couchsurfied with a guy in Osaka during spring break. What was I doing there? I don't remember much apart from eating takoyaki. I remember him talking about a knee injury crushing his dreams of professional football. I remember the harsh yet musical twang to his accent, how so many of his words were shortened and contracted, how the melody of his words ran counter to the standard pronunciation I learned in school. I remember what he said when I thanked him politely as I was about to leave, using the words I'd been taught: *Hontou ni, arigatou gozaimasu. Thank you very much.*

He shook his head and groaned. *That's so stiff, you gotta loosen up a bit. Repeat after me: hona, mata ne. Well, see you again.* I said the words slowly, unused to their casualness. But I liked what I heard: lively, warm, rough around the edges. The thank-you implicit in the send-off. Classic Osaka dialect, friendly and expressive, the dialect of comedians on TV, a bit like what Scouse or Brummie would be to the UK. At the time, I was still crafting who I was in Japanese, trying to figure out how to express myself. This felt closer to how I wanted to speak.

Things were a little different in Kyoto. People here spoke a little more gently, a little more softly. I'd been coming to the jazz kissa for a year now, ostensibly for coffee but also for an informal education in learning how to speak local.

At first I was content to let the hum of conversation wash over me. Then I began paying attention to their speech, how it strayed from conventional Japanese grammar, which syllables they stressed in the words. I tried it out in a bid to fit in, or rather, to not stand out. I ended my sentences with *ya* instead of the *da* or *desu* copulas. I said *ee* instead of *ii*. I shortened my words: *omoshiroi ne* became *omoroï naa*, *chigau yo* became *chau de*. I negated verbs with *hen* instead of *nai*, which was a whole new region-specific grammar rule to learn.

Like learning standard Japanese, the path to speaking this dialect was littered with errors, and every time I thought I'd gained some

semblance of competence, I tripped over someone's mumbles, another idiomatic expression I'd never heard of. Some days it was like a muscle: once I'd warmed up, my tongue ran along nicely. Some days I didn't even have to try, as it flowed out of me like a fountain; other days it was like trying to run across a field of nettles in shoes three sizes too big. I loved its melody, its warmth, how much more of myself I could convey in this dialect than bog-standard Japanese.

A few years later, after I moved to Tokyo, I wasn't able to conjure up Kansai dialect at will. Or rather, I couldn't sustain it when I did because it felt too jarring in the big city, so I lapsed back into the blankness of standard Japanese. Strange, sad, but true. This isn't uncommon: I once asked a friend from Fukui about the Fukui accent, because I didn't hear it in his speech. It turned out the other person had to be speaking the same dialect for his accent to emerge. It's the same for me. Going back to Kyoto – more importantly, leaving Tokyo – brings it all back. I shed the stodgy linguistic weight of the big city. My speech loosens, lightens, brightens. For the few days I'm there, my Japanese comes alive again.

■ ■

Early autumn. This time, Yamaguchi-san was not in her green dress. She was in a long white shirt, and I noticed several medicinal bandages on her thighs. Purple veins under her liver-spotted skin. Her demeanour was strict and thorny. I'd picked up my bowl in the wrong way again. I wondered what to ask her, where to even begin. I didn't understand most of what she was saying, even more so than the first time I met her. I didn't know that this was the last time I would see her.

■ ■

D & J are the first friends I made on Instagram. The three of us met up during my second autumn in Kyoto, when they flew in from Singapore. They are soft-spoken, thoughtful, and bookish; I wish they didn't live so far away. I took them for lunch at a cramped little

yōshoku 洋食 place, which has since shut down. When I made small talk with the owner, he asked, *Are they your parents?* And I laughed, because they aren't much older than me, but maybe he intuited an easy intimacy between the three of us. Afterwards, I wandered around the area with them. I took them to my favourite jazz cafe nearby. I stopped by the katsuobushi shop, and a beloved cafe-bookstore where the owner takes forever to make drip coffee. She plied the three of us with moon-shaped biscuits, thumb-sized cookies for luck, candied papaya, and pineapple tarts. I would meet up with them again in a few years, but for now I had the memory of this afternoon, warm and golden, full of laughter and good conversation.

■ ■

I wished I could bottle the early mornings in late autumn in Kyoto: the dawn hours were crisp, chilly, luminous. Everything was at once softer and more vivid – rock walls slick with dew, asterisk-shaped moss lit up by morning sun, a carpet of fallen persimmon leaves in crimson and bronze. I loved them once I had shaken off the trauma of waking up. My favourite temple had limited-entry, early-bird hours for two weeks in late November, and booking the ticket was worth the awkward phone call for the light alone. I have never forgotten the mist clinging to tall, feathery clusters of bamboo, nor how the cedars glow with the first rays of sunlight.

Note

[3](#) Generally considered 300 BC – 300 AD.

A Bowl of Tea

USUCHA

He begins to make tea. Sitting on his heels, seiza-style, he folds a purple silk cloth, tucks it into his obi, and then unfurls it again. He gently wipes the tea scoop and the lacquered tea canister with the cloth. Each fluid and deliberate movement is the result of decades of practice.

I'm sitting with a handful of tour guests on the floor of a tearoom, barely breathing, conversation having given way to rapt attention. We have just eaten a tea sweet: a steamed mochi filled with shiroan. Steaming has rendered its skin soft and pliant, and my fingertips sink into it as I pick it up. A dash of miso gives the white bean paste a subtle, savoury edge. Its sweetness lingers on my tongue.

Today, we will drink usucha – thin tea, a cappuccino-smooth whisked suspension of matcha powder and hot water. This is what tea practitioners consider 'thin', and what the rest of the world thinks of when you say 'matcha'. It cannot be rushed: the water has been slowly heating in the kettle over charcoal for an hour now, murmuring like rain in a forest.

Having cleaned and purified his tools, he measures several scoops of matcha into a bowl and pours a scant dipperful of hot water over. He dips the bamboo whisk into the bowl, its slender splines hovering over the bottom. His left hand steadying the bowl on the mat, he whips his wrist back and forth. Slowly at first, then faster, until his hand blurs. I have come to think of this as the speed of tea. You can hear the tea take shape, frothing with the vigorous *shaka-shaka* sound of whisking. How the rough splashing of hot water against the sides of the bowl softens, eases into the velvety sound of tea as the tea comes to life. His hand slows, sweeping the whisk from side to side, breaking up the larger bubbles that have formed on top. And then the tea is ready.

He turns the bowl clockwise twice. Still kneeling, he moves quietly on his knees, places the bowl in front of me. We bow to each

other. I take the bowl, and turn it clockwise twice.

I raise the bowl to my mouth and drink the tea. It's silky and leaf-sweet, flooding my tongue with the taste of spring.

THE WAY OF TEA

Of all the places we visited on the tours I led in Kyoto, this teahouse, Kanjoan, was my favourite.

First we would receive an introduction to the art of tea ceremony from tea master Michael Sōzui. (Michael once corrected me: 'tea ceremony' as a concept doesn't exist in Japanese; the word is a product of Western imagination and projection. Its name is 茶道 sadō, the way of tea. For this, one does not just drink tea; one practises tea. Tell someone in Kyoto that you do tea, and the meaning is clear. Similarly, 'tea master' is a misnomer: they are 茶人 chajin, or 'tea person,' a person who practises making tea.)

Michael would then give the guests a friendly lecture on tea and walk them through a 茶事 chaji, describing what this formal four hour-long tea gathering entailed, before feeding us sweets and making us tea. Leading tours granted me free access to experiences like this, which are well beyond the means of most twenty-somethings. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that being able to return to this tearoom was one of the principal reasons I kept doing these tours. I am almost – but not quite! – embarrassed to admit that the sweets played a big part in this.

THE SOUND OF TEA

The click of the bamboo ladle against the kettle lid. The soft sigh of charcoal collapsing. A dipperful of water poured from above, its sound echoing in the hollows of the pot. The resonant tap as the wooden door slides shut. The sudden discontented caw of a crow, a reminder of the residential neighbourhood we're in. Water trickling down the eaves on a rainy day. The faint rustle of his kimono as he moves. The sound of whisking, of tea becoming. The sound of drinking tea.

SILENCE

To enter the tearoom is to step into another world. When we arrive, the road in front of the entrance is wet with freshly-sprinkled water, letting us know he's ready to welcome us in. Crossing the threshold, peace settles on me like snow on a tree. We leave the chaos of the outside world behind, the world of fire, for the tranquillity of the tearoom, the world of water. We enter a space where silence is possible.

I grew to love the moments of silence in the tearoom. In part it was a retreat from my work. I would constantly talk to people for two days, lecturing, answering questions, offering (hopefully) funny anecdotes and factoids. Sometimes I smiled so much my face hurt. But when Michael began making tea, the conversation would slow and fade, as everyone else shushed each other to watch. In the tearoom, I could let the tea speak for itself.

There are many different forms of silence: the quietness of snow piling up, the throbbing of your blood, the silence of animosity. Silence is what you hear when you remove noise. It seems like tea itself. At the heart of this rite of hospitality and all its trappings is simply this: the host makes the tea, and the guest drinks the tea. Everything else is noise.

MOON-VIEWING

I was once a budding art historian, and consequently spent a lot of time in places like the British Museum. I love looking at beautiful things, but I enjoy them far less now.

It's the sheer muchness of a museum: every other item is a fine specimen of its type, and no single object has your full attention before the siren call of the next exhibit. It's jarring to see, for example, a Buddhist statue sitting in a brightly lit hall somewhere, plaintive and lonely, stripped of context. No fresh flowers or offerings, the scent of incense replaced by the smell of other people's sweat and perfume.

A tearoom is the opposite of a museum in every sense. There is beauty in every corner, but it is elegant, restrained, full of purpose. In the alcove hangs a single scroll, not a row of calligraphy

masterpieces. There are no gaudy bouquets, only a single branch or spray of some seasonal flower, artlessly rising out of its vase as though blooming in the fields. No endless rooms of objects vying for your attention, no captions to tell you if something is several centuries old. The most humble-looking object might well be the most valuable, so it pays to be attentive. In the tearoom, everything is of equal worth, well-loved and precious.

Once Michael has made us each a bowl of tea, he leaves the room so the guests can examine some of the objects. Not only the bowls, but also the tea scoop and the tea caddy. He will not answer any questions about them until everyone has examined them, so you can look without any preconceptions. *If you tell people what they're looking at, he says, they won't look as closely.*

I admit: it is a privilege to be able to handle things that might otherwise sit behind glass or in some wealthy person's collection. Is this why people become curators or art restorers? To be able to touch something, run their fingers across its surface, pick it up to see how it was made? I never had the patience to become an art historian, but regular visits to the tearoom made a fine compromise.

Of the many fine bowls I've drunk tea from here, my favourite is one Michael uses in October after the autumn equinox. This month, if we're lucky, we can see the harvest moon shining full and white in a clear indigo sky. For those who practise tea, October signifies nagori, the end of a season and the beginning of a new one.

It looks like an ordinary white ceramic bowl at first glance. But as with everything in the tearoom, it merits close examination. There's a depth to its glazed surface, autumnal shades of rust and earth, a faint network of mottled veins that evoke the moon. Cool to the touch, like marble, it reminds me of dal hangari, Korean porcelain moon jars with similarly lunar qualities. Flip the bowl, and you find that the bottom stand is shaped like a crescent – a sly nod to the moon, a little surprise for the tea-drinking guest.

In a glass box, this bowl might have been displayed bottom-up, like telling you the punchline first. Its delight diminished, the surprise lost.

KOICHA

Only once have I ever tasted koicha, or thick tea. This is the tea one drinks at a chaji, an intimate affair with a maximum of five guests. Koicha is the apex of this four hour session, the entire point of gathering in the tearoom. An invitation to share a bowl of tea is to be taken literally: a single bowl of koicha is shared among all guests on account of its richness.

I attended a chaji at Michael's teahouse several years ago, along with a colleague. We didn't drink tea for almost three hours. We watched him build a fire with chrysanthemum charcoal, so named for its cross-section of radiating crack lines resembling the flower. We examined the scroll hanging in the alcove. He'd painted it for today: the Big Dipper in black ink, each star precisely dotted.

As we waited for the water to come to a boil, we drank amazake by candlelight, ate our way through a parade of little home cooked dishes. Slices of raw sea bream in yuzu sauce; a single, tender prawn resting atop a slice of kabura turnip, in a bewitching, clear soup tasting of sea and umami; salt-grilled yellowtail with crackly silver skin; white rice grown in neighbouring Shiga prefecture, the water in the paddy fields so clean you can see fish swimming around. We stood up to stretch our legs in the garden. Then, finally, the koicha.

We watched him make the tea. Unlike usucha, koicha contains just enough water to transform several scoops of tea into a glossy paste. It's so rich it flows more like lava or honey, as though you're about to eat paint. It is tea as I'd never experienced it. If you could drink a typhoon rushing through a tea farm in spring, perhaps this might begin to describe koicha. Overwhelming by design, it demanded my attention. A single mouthful lingered on my tongue like an aged wine. I wanted to drink it all. I reluctantly wiped the rim clean before passing the bowl along to the next guest.

I haven't drank koicha since that chaji. It's not like I couldn't make it at home; it would be easy enough to find a suitable matcha, though water from Mt. Atago might be more difficult to come by. It's more that the notion of drinking koicha has always felt out of place

in my cluttered apartment, without the magic conjured by a candlelit tearoom.

Lately, I'm beginning to think this should change. Perhaps one day I'll put away my phone and tidy my desk. I'll light the candles, sip on sake, make myself a spread of little bites. Measure a few scoops of matcha and a splash of hot water into a bowl, sweep a whisk through until it turns into a glossy paste. One day I might slow down enough to make a bowl of tea.

REASONS FOR TEA

To celebrate. To thank someone. To enjoy the scent of different incense. To listen to the rain. To view an autumn moon reflected on a pond outside. To watch snow blanket the garden. To hear the texture of that silence. To walk through freshly-fallen snow before dawn on the way to the teahouse. To drink tea by candlelight. To remember someone. To bask in the light, the cool of early summer mornings. Because it is spring. Because the leaves are changing colour. Because it is autumn. Because the plum blossoms are out. Because the world is beautiful. Because why not?

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

(IV)

In 2015, the Japanese government set ambitious targets for overseas tourism: increasing the number of visitors to Japan from 19.7 million in 2015 to 40 million in 2020. Kyoto's population numbered around 1.47 million in 2015, and decreased slowly over the next few years. The number of annual inbound travellers to Kyoto would peak at 8 million in 2019.

Overtourism was the last thing on my mind when I started working in travel, but I would start living these statistics when I took my first tour group around at the peak of the autumn leaves season. There were only a dozen adults, but I was so nervous about losing them in the crowds that I didn't relax until the whole two days were over. As I became more experienced, I worried (a little) less about losing track of everyone, and more concerned about how to navigate growing waves of tourists without losing my mind (and temper). At the Golden Pavilion, for example, we shuffled slowly with hundreds, thousands of other people along a prescribed route to a small clearing across from the pavilion. The sound of our fellow humans, ceaseless as a river: footsteps on gravel, conversation, instructions being called out, the constant staccato click of photos being taken. Everyone raising their phones and cameras as though in supplication, like this was a new form of prayer. I tiptoed and waved to the group, doing silent headcounts. The walking route through this temple takes half an hour to 45 minutes depending on the crowds. I tried to remember that it was always the first time for the guests, they were always excited to see it before we arrived. When we exited the temple, everyone breathed a little sigh of short-lived relief. The box had been ticked, the vaunted location conquered. Not everywhere was like this at first. But by the end of 2019, the city felt like it was ready to snap.

Each season was worse than the last. The tours became outright unpleasant to run: the hotel rooms were expensive and increasingly

difficult to secure (they had to be booked a year in advance), restaurants had to be booked weeks if not months in advance, the customer experience was sub-par to what everyone knew was possible, the tour guides disliked (some, detested) the itinerary, which – although developed before the huge tourism rush – included many of city's busiest sightseeing spots. But everyone wanted to come to Japan. Almost everyone wanted to visit Kyoto. Everyone wanted to see the temples, walk along Pontocho, stay in a ryokan or traditional machiya, maybe even rent a kimono. Demand was insistent, relentless, rapacious.

More and more, I felt torn. I couldn't very well discourage people from visiting. I wanted my guests to enjoy the city I had adopted; I also wanted fewer tourists. The tours were increasingly draining, but they supplemented my low salary. On tour, I was legally obliged to deliver the product exactly as it was sold to the customers. There was no chance of deviating from the scripted route, no time to show them my favourite temples in the quieter areas of Kyoto. I felt bad for my customers: they could have seen the city my colleagues and I loved, but my job was to provide them with what they thought they wanted.

■ ■

I had no personal interest in maiko, who are a sort of visual shorthand for Kyoto's traditions, but I often read about them for work. My clients' faces lit up when they saw one on a night walk through Gion. Her pale, cherubic face and coiffed hair, a rustle of long, brightly coloured sleeves as she disappeared into a taxi or through a sliding door. 'Maiko-spotting', as though they were birds in the wild. They had been making the news recently for receiving unwanted attention from camera-toting tourists. *They like the attention, really*, said the girl I lived with. I nodded, unconvinced.

■ ■

A client was in Kyoto and invited me out to dinner with his family. I had spent the last few months obsessing over the details of their extravagant multi-week tour, and was curious about them.

Their hotel concierge made the reservation at a nearby restaurant, the kind that's discreet, expensive and doesn't bother with social media.

Three things I remember about this dinner. One, the matriarch had the poshest accent I'd ever heard in real life: I've never heard anyone drawl and stretch their 'A's so languorously. Two, the grilled wagyu was excellent. Three, is what he told me: *Anything you do, stick with it for at least two years. After that, if you've learned all you can, move on to something else.*

These words would keep coming back every time I thought about leaving – this job, this city, this country.

■ ■

One day, I noticed a new guesthouse in my neighbourhood. Hanging by the noren was a large white lantern with the bright red circle on it, 'Guest House' written in font meant to evoke calligraphy. I felt aggrieved and resentful that they had come this far up north, into such a residential area. But it was also inevitable: dozens of hotels had popped up downtown in response to burgeoning numbers of tourists, and neither hotel-building nor tourism would slow down until the pandemic hit. Space was at a premium in Kyoto, and neighbourhoods like mine were the next obvious target. Shit, it had happened. Here I was, a (moderately, I hoped) curmudgeonly local, ever more hypocritical for working in travel and being part of the overtourism problem. That my impact was minuscule didn't make me feel any better.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

(V)

It is late November in the last photograph I ever took of her. She is sitting on a carpet of golden ginkgo leaves, looking away from the camera. We must have walked down to the street with all the ramen shops south of us for lunch, and wandered onwards to a playground near where this tree stood.

A few days before this photograph was taken, she had told me she was leaving this job, this city, this country. Because I had been away on tour for most of the preceding months, I was one of the last people to find out; our landlord knew several months before I did. I told her I was happy for her, how great it was that she was pursuing her dreams. I responded the way I always do: I cried.

I haven't always been the best housemate, she said, hugging me. But look, no matter where I go, you're always welcome to visit, and you'll always have a home with me.

I often look back at this moment. It comes back to me in choppy scenes, retinal flashes. The words are seared into my memory, and yet I wonder if she'd said them at all, whether I'm imagining things, whether she'd meant any of it, because it was one of the last times she would ever speak to me as a friend. It took a long time to sink in. I've always been slow to read the room. As the months and years went by, as communication dried up, remained one-sided, I finally began to have the creeping sense that things were not as they should have been.

The last time I saw her was at an event when she was back in town a few months later; she hadn't told me she was coming, but I had heard it from somebody else. I saw her talking to someone else in the room and walked up to her. *Oh*, she said. A pause. *You alright?* I shook my head. I felt my face scrunching up. I remember the slight recoil, the widening of her eyes, the nod. *Uh huh, okay.* What did I do next? We didn't speak beyond that. I vaguely remember her turning away, something in me clicking. It's possible I

left the building after that, and walked until I reached the banks of the river, face wet, eyes sore.

■ ■

My managers asked if I wanted to move to Tokyo, as I was now the only full-time employee left in Kyoto. I demurred. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to leave. I didn't know how I could bear to leave.

■ ■

I learned that I should never look for new housemates on Tinder.

■ ■

No one should have to live with a stranger grieving for someone else.

■ ■

Later, someone told me that some relationships have a best-before date. What he actually said was 賞味期限 shoumikigen, literally 'the limit of taste'. Technically still edible, but it won't taste good anymore. It won't be at its best. This is a good way to think about growing apart from people, failing to keep in touch, losing touch, letting them go. It made me feel a little better about the friends I had lost; it reminded me that the ones who are here outnumber those who aren't. Some relationships also have a 消費期限 shouhikigen, a real expiry date, the point after which something is no longer usable and has to be thrown out.

I'd like to thank whoever told me this, but the expiry date for that relationship has already passed.

■ ■

My second winter in Kyoto saw more snow than I could ever remember experiencing. How does one dress for weather like this? I had never lived somewhere this cold, so cold I wore a woollen beanie to sleep, waking up with my breath curling out of me in white wisps. Snow blanketed the fields and mountains outside, the sky

cool blue-grey. Downtown, the snow turned to slush as people went about their lives. I pedalled through pristine, freshly-fallen patches of snow at midnight. There were footprints interspersed with tracks left by other cyclists: patterned lines thick and thin, smoothed and whorled, criss-crossing and corkscrewing through the snow.

I still looked forward to spring, when a tree whose name I still don't know took on a canopy of pale yellow-white blossoms. There are a few visible from the viewpoint at the Silver Pavilion: they always look like giant cauliflowers.

■ ■

Even now, I dislike remembering any part of 2017, the year in which I mostly woke up and then wanted never to wake up again. I felt like everyone else knew something I didn't, and if I could find out what it was my life would fall into place. I wasn't religious at all, but I found myself half-heartedly talking to whatever was out there, trying to bargain with the universe. *If I get a corporate job, will I be happy? What if I went back to school? If I leave Japan will I ever have to feel this sad again?* Pleas for help, prayers that didn't work out. Pacing around in mental circles like this made sense to me in a strange and twisted way, girded with the internal logic of the anxious and depressed.

Increasingly, I felt trapped. This was unreasonable. Everyone wanted to come to Kyoto. So many people would trade places with me in a heartbeat. I lived in this place full of history and beauty, so why was I sad? Didn't I know how lucky I was? Why did I wake up every single day feeling like I wanted to die? I didn't want to be left behind. I should have been everything. I couldn't be everything. I would never catch up. I ruined everything I touched. I wanted things to change, but only in a way I could control. I was terrified of leaving, of disrupting the narrative I had created around myself. I didn't know how I could continue to stay.

■ ■

A city cannot love you back.

■ ■

Months passed. I felt like I was turning into a ghost. I began sort-of seeing someone, and that 'sort-of' informed every excuse I made for him when he kept me waiting for hours, ignored every small token of affection, ghosted me for weeks. I even almost moved to Fukuoka in early summer because he liked the city. I don't even *like* Fukuoka, although I would have denied this at the time. At the last minute, I called the real estate agent and told him I wouldn't, I couldn't sign the papers for the apartment. They made aggrieved noises at me. I apologised and hung up. Immediately, the tension in my jaw and shoulders dissipated, and I knew moving to Tokyo was the right choice. I was so ready to leave Kyoto. I was ready to run away again.

■ ■

I began telling people I was leaving. Only a handful, like the proprietors of my regular haunts, and a few acquaintances. They asked why, and nodded knowingly when I said it was for work. How could it be otherwise? Tokyo, the big city, the economic black hole of Japan, pulling everyone in from the boonies to its spaghetti of sardine-packed trains and skyscrapers and highways. Tokyo, the city I left, the one I was going back to.

Sabishii. This was their response. A single word. *Lonely, lonesome, desolate*, says the dictionary. But who was going to be lonely? Was it me or them? Did this mean they would miss me? Or that I would be lonely when I left? Was it a prediction, a curse, a confession? How could I bear to go when someone said this word to me?

Mata oide ne, they said. *Come back again*.

■ ■

I hadn't spent as much time at the river as I could have in these last two years. I divided what little time I had left here between the jazz kissa, the shotengai, and the river.

One midsummer evening, I headed down to the delta, sat down on one of the turtle-shaped stepping stones in the middle of the river. I soaked my feet in the cold water and read a book until

daylight faded. I didn't want to go back to my packed boxes, the house I couldn't wait to leave. I stayed until I was too cold not to go.

■ ■

Early August. Two years after I moved here, a day before I was due to leave the house in the hills for good. Summers in Kyoto were excruciating, like wading through sweat. The persimmons on the tree were small, hard and green. In the overgrown garden, I watched two swallowtail butterflies mating, each as large as my palm. They drifted from plant to plant, their wings opening and closing languidly. Their coupling lasted for what seemed like forever.

Rainy Day in Kyoto

The sound of rainwater is the surface it strikes. In the garden, it fell on the persimmon tree outside, an uneven blatter of water on its leaves dripping through the canopy and onto the sodden weeds below. It struck the ceramic roof tiles and flowed along the eaves, trickling loud and melodious down the rain chain, plopping into the overflowing stone basin next to the engawa. It was the sound of wet pebbles and squelching mud on the way home. It was the soft hiss-roar of water and wind buffeting the long grasses. It was the sound of early summer.

June is the month of the plum rains, tsuyu, a transliteration of the Chinese term meiyu 梅雨. It's the season of unripe plums and making plum wine, of hydrangeas, of amagaeru, leaf-green Japanese tree frogs no longer than 5cm long.

I don't recall ever seeing one in the garden, but I heard their high-pitched chirping and burbling and squeaking, almost cricket-like. In that season I worked until late to a soundtrack of rustling rain and mating frogs and my clacking keyboard. Like you, I've always been a night person. I loved those late nights, especially in early June when it was still wet and cool, not muggy. I remember often texting you from my futon until I drifted off to sleep.

The rain is different now, where I live in Tokyo. There are no frogs. Rain now sounds like tin roofs and concrete walls, sharp and manmade. There was a recent, unseasonably cold October night I lay awake for three hours while it rained outside. It wasn't the sort of heavy rain I could fall asleep to. It played its relentless drumroll on roof tiles and windows, water colliding with half-formed thoughts like a jackhammer in my head. My partner's breathing next to me, steady and even. The creaking window hinges. I stared at the ceiling. I wondered what you were doing.

■ ■

I think about when we first became friends, just before I graduated from university. It was my last summer in London. We

were sitting next to each other, the youngest people at this society meeting. I knew nothing about you, so I still don't know why I turned to you that day and suggested hanging out, as though we were in kindergarten. I didn't know it then, but I needed a friend.

I barely remember those summer months now, but I remember listening to you play the piano. Sneaking into an empty classroom and watching Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* on the projector screen. Walking around Little Venice on a sunny day. Watching *The Wind Cannot Read* on my laptop in a park and joking for months afterwards at how awful and ham-fisted it was. I had no name for this, only the world falling away in your company, the sheer joy of everything in those scant hours.

The summer before we met, I watched Makoto Shinkai's latest animated film *The Garden of Words* at a cinema in Tokyo. In brief: Takao Akitsuki, high school student and aspiring shoemaker, and Yukari Yukino, classical Japanese literature teacher, spend time with each other in Shinjuku Gyoen, whenever a rainy morning comes along. What I remember most about it was all the different types of rain: slight drizzle through sunlit clouds, relentless rainfall in Shinjuku Gyoen, sudden squalls of rain and mist on a slate grey day.

The last film we ever watched together was *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. I was staying at your family home in London. Everyone else was asleep. You'd laugh, but it felt like we were the only ones left in the whole world, completely immersed in this melancholy film. Now I can't call to ask whether you've watched *The Garden of Words* and what you thought of it. Whether you enjoyed its use of classic Japanese poetry, whether you liked the raindrop-like piano solos in the background.

The day Takao meets Yukino is the Kanto region's 栗花落 tsuyuri, a word referring to the rainy season starting when the chestnut flowers bloom and fall. She tells him that she's unable to walk properly; she isn't talking about shoes, but everything. Their relationship isn't quite platonic, romantic, or erotic; two people, alone together, taking shelter in the rain. It's a love story, says Shinkai, but instead of the modern idea of romantic love (koi, 恋,

equivalent to ren'ai 恋愛), he aims to emphasise the traditional concept of love as described over a thousand years ago – koi 孤悲, to long for someone in solitude.

■ ■

One of the first Japanese onomatopoeia I ever learned was ザーザー zaa-zaa, the sound of a downpour. Zaa zaa buri, said my teacher slowly, enunciating each syllable, stretching the ah sound out. It sounds like an especially blustery downpour, gusts of wind sending great sheets of water across the roofs, like handfuls of gravel thrown on a plastic awning.

Onomatopoeic rain words often crop up in everyday Japanese: パラパラ para-para for a delicate, continuous sprinkle of small raindrops, often thought of as interchangeable with the light rain of ポツポツ potsu-potsu. しとしと shito-shito, for those soft, quiet rains. These are a few out of the hundreds that exist to describe rain in all its variations, subdivided by season, volume, sound, sentiment.

Out of a list of several hundred, I would've cherry-picked the prettiest rain words and texted them to you: 春霖 shunrin, spring rains that help the cherry blossoms bloom. 雨露 ametsuyu or uro, for rain and dew. 煙雨 en'u or kirisame, rain that falls like smoke. A tendency towards melodrama: these words, kludged together as obvious signposts for my feelings. You always knew I had no talent for subtlety. With me, if it rained, it poured. But it was too late by the time I understood: we got along because we were both sentimental people. You just hid it far, far better.

■ ■

It's curious to remember how much I once avoided going out on rainy days. Our first meetups were all sunny days, or at the very least not rainy, because I insisted on that. When we were still talking, you'd always ask if I had an umbrella if I was going out on a rainy day. Since then I've hiked in downpours, cycled through

typhoons, and own a bright orange rain jacket. Sometimes I wonder if you'd recognise me now.

Everything I have to remember you by is digital. Walls of text punctuated by photos, thoroughly mundane chronicles of our daily lives, because that's the sort of thing you do with close faraway friends. It feels like a museum, one I couldn't bring myself to visit or delete for years. Out of all the photos we swapped, there are snapshots of rainy days in our respective cities, or wherever we were: A woman pushing a trolley heaped with cardboard in Hong Kong, face hidden by a grey umbrella. A blurry rainbow spotted from a train. Dew-spattered autumn leaves from a shrine in Kyoto. The skylight in your house, grey sky and pelting rain through the glass.

Here's a photo I would've sent you: a little shop crammed floor to ceiling with umbrellas in a shopping arcade. A white paper lantern hanging above the entrance, 傘の博物館 written on it in ultramarine. Kasa no hakubutsukan, the Museum of Umbrellas. More umbrellas than I'd ever seen in a single place, even more than that posh shop on Tottenham Court Road. Messy bouquets of candy-coloured umbrellas, silk-printed ones with cats and Paris motifs all over them, tiny paper cocktail brollies nestled alongside white-and-red oil-paper umbrellas.

Inside, there was a whole corner dedicated to 高級紳士洋傘, 'high glass gentlemen' Western-style umbrellas – made in Japan, no less! – which I'm sure would have amused you greatly. I like to think you'd have suggested one of these for my film noir debut, like the time I said I was going to a jazz bar on a rainy evening. All I was missing, you said, was a detective job.

■ ■

What I did have instead was a tour guiding job. In that other life, I would bring tour groups to Gio-ji, a secluded, moss-covered temple in west Kyoto. There's a small thatched-roof hall with a few statues within, but really we visited for the garden that looks straight out of a fairytale. It's blanketed with no fewer than 15 different types of mosses, shadowed by a dense canopy of maples, with a

bamboo water fountain burbling in the background. There's often a Japanese bush warbler singing in the trees somewhere.

Gio-ji was always better in the rain. This is true of Kyoto's gardens, which come alive in the rain, every shade of colour water-slicked and extra vivid. Fallen maple leaves gleam like rubies underfoot. Rain perks up dry mosses and transforms them into velvet carpets in all shades of green. The crowds thin on a rainy day, and we no longer have to jostle with other tourists. This is how I sold my tour guests on a rainy day when they wanted sunshine. I'm not sure they were convinced.

At Gio-ji, I'd run my hands along velvet-soft, feathery clumps of hinoki cypress moss, whose taxonomic name *Pyrrhobryum dozymanum* supposedly derives from the Greek for 'flame', and fudegoke, 'calligraphy brush moss', with its needle-fine strands. I'd point out cypress moss with its sharper, spikier shape than its cousin, resembling thousands of asterisks on the garden floor. I wanted to stay longer than we ever had time for – 15 minutes at most, because we were on a fixed schedule and I could feel the mood shift from initial delight to impatience: *Where to now, where are we going next?*

What I did instead was play them your song.

You'd composed this long before we became friends, and I've listened to it so often now that it comes to me, unbidden, when I open an umbrella in Kyoto. I start humming it under my breath, tapping and drumming my fingers.

Somehow you managed to recreate the texture of a rainy afternoon in this city without a single Japanese instrument – not that I know the first thing about describing music, but I listen to it over and over again, wondering how you arrived at the tabla, whose percussive rattle sounds like raindrops skittering across corrugated tin roofs, or the clarinet that's like birdsong after rain, or the mellow plinking notes of the marimba. How it reminds me of skipping and splashing through puddles. How my heart twists, how my throat catches. How the music swells and crescendos to absolute joy.

I'd play this for them if we visited the temple on a rainy day. Did they hear the pride in my voice when I told them you'd written it;

could they tell how much I missed you? Through my phone's loudspeaker, the music came out too tinny. My audience would start fidgeting. I usually stopped playing it before the end.

Shortly before we stopped talking, I told you about playing your song at Gio-ji; you said that made you happy. I played it for people long after we stopped talking. Now when I listen to it, I'm back in Kyoto again, at the temple you've never been to, in this city you've never lived in and never will. It's raining. If I listen closely enough, I can almost hear your voice again.

■ ■

In November 2021, academics Sukaina Hirji and Meena Krishnamurthy wrote about romantic friendships in the *New Statesman*. Taking the relationship between the novelist Iris Murdoch and the philosopher Philippa Foot as a starting point, they explored the idea of relationships that are "intensely intimate, but that in some way fall short of full-blown romantic relationships." They bring much of the same vulnerability – perhaps more – as traditional romance, perhaps even a kind of erotic love, but don't require sexual or physical attraction. It seems contiguous with Shinkai's 'koi' in that there seem to be parallels between Takao and Yukino, and Murdoch and Foot, both pairs "having a deep desire to know and be known."

I wonder if this framework would have saved us. Stopped me from putting my foot in it, catapulting us into the awkward place of no return. I thought of you when I read this piece: would we have been able to talk about us this way? What if I knew back then what I know now? If we'd had more models of friendship to draw on, if we could have been more candid, more willing to hurt and be hurt? What if you hadn't withdrawn when I lashed out? Could we have stood our ground, talked it out? What if I had said nothing, allowed time to quietly dissolve us instead?

At 30, Yukino's character resonates much more with me. There's a scene halfway through the film where it's summer, and she's sitting on the same bench in Shinjuku Gyoen. She's drinking canned beer, praying for rain so that she and Takao will meet again. We hear her

think to herself – and this is my rough translation – *I'm 27, and no wiser than I was at 15. I'm still here, still in the same place.*

I was 27 too, the year we stopped talking. Even though I'd left London and moved six times across three countries in the intervening years, I still felt the way Yukino did, as though nothing had changed, that I was going nowhere, retracing my steps to the same dead-ends over and over again. You were never going to leave London. I was never going to move back. Yukino's rainy mornings were my time off work each year when I could visit grey, drizzly London.

Years passed. People came and went. I walked into disastrous dates and relationships over and over again. I made friends, lost them, changed jobs, started freelancing. Late-night texts, silly puns, incoherent morning messages, private jokes. Who texts me now at midnight, asking me what I'm up to? You read everything I wrote. Who do I text when I want to talk about musicals? How to tell you that *Hadestown* saved me in the first year of the pandemic? The day Sondheim died I almost pulled out my phone to check in: he'd meant so much to you. Halfway across the world, always there for each other's messy breakdowns. I wanted to come first. I wanted you to be proud of me.

■ ■

Somewhere in Kyoto, there's a storm. An honest-to-goodness dark and stormy night. Rain and wind hammer the windows, and they rattle like a bag of marbles. There's a girl texting someone halfway across the world from a futon. Someone's walking home through the woods in London, and as the sky darkens and clouds, their phone lights up. Maybe the sky splits open and they get drenched in an instant. Someone walks home and reads the messages. In that world, it hasn't stopped raining yet.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart

(VI)

Moving back to Tokyo was the first time I'd really had to hunt for an apartment in Japan. I hadn't the faintest clue where I'd like to live, so I looked for somewhere within cycling distance from my workplace. After viewing some serious howlers and being rejected by half of the landlords for being foreign, I picked the first apartment that wasn't falling apart, didn't look like it was haunted by a dozen of its last denizens, and had a bulk-buy supermarket nearby. It was only after meeting up with a friend that I learned I'd unwittingly moved to one of the most hipster neighbourhoods in Tokyo. I'd never even *heard* of this area before moving here. Sure, my bathtub was a super old-school gas-powered balance boiler from the 1970s and turning it on was like shifting gears on a manual transmission car, but I lived around the corner from the (now-ex) Prime Minister and the best lattes on this side of town. It was a decent start. Home, for now.

■ ■

Of course, it was difficult to let go of Kyoto. Like a dog with a bone, like a barnacle on a ship's hull, I had always been incapable of letting go. Isn't that true for pretty much all writers, trying to pin life down on a page with words? Eventually I left my office job to freelance full-time, but continued leading tours for the company so I could keep going back in spring and autumn. It was the same goddamn tour I'd done so many times, the same crowded temples, the same stories, the same jokes (I'm not *that* funny, not intentionally, I promise), but it gave me a reason to visit, with lodging and travel costs covered.

Freelance life was busy. I said yes to almost every job, because I didn't know when the rug would be pulled out from under me. While I lived in Tokyo, it seemed like I was living out of a suitcase half the time, too, travelling for work or to see family, but deep down I knew I kept moving as a distraction from my own brain. Everything inside

was too much; I thought it was normal to feel like crying and puking all the time, and everyone else was stronger and could hide it better than me. I kept moving because staying still meant having to reckon with myself.

■ ■

There were many things I missed about Kyoto. Like having mountains nearby, or soaking my feet in the Kamogawa. And the food. Tokyo may have more feted restaurants, but there are things Kyoto simply does better, like my favourite soy milk ramen. Its velvety broth coats my tongue like single cream; it's close to perfect with the acid-bright, salty pickled plum paste. Michael's tea, and his special steamed mochi. The matcha cake at a cafe downtown: deliberately underbaked, containing the merest smattering of flour, bites of matcha and white chocolate fudge swooning on your fork. Most cakes in Tokyo taste like sugar and sawdust by comparison. Proper warabimochi, freshly made with bracken fern starch: an unattractive mud colour, but cold and sweet, with a gloriously slippery, pliant stickiness to it. Why can't you find good warabimochi anywhere else? Maybe it's the water. I don't have much of a sweet tooth, but I can always find room for these small bites.

■ ■

There was a favourite garden I visited solely for its pond. There's water all over Kyoto – rivers, canals, puddles – but nothing is like this pond, so glassy and serene it looks like it carries the sky within. I went there when I wanted to dissolve into a body of water. Koi swim in this pond, gold and crimson and white. They look like they're drifting through the sky.

■ ■

On one of my work trips to Kyoto, I caught up with R, who had lived in the city for decades. I had met him through my former housemate. He radiates a kind of calm and benevolence I often wish I had.

By the way, I have to ask, he said. *Did something happen between the both of you?* It's about her. My mouth tightened

involuntarily. I could feel my eyes growing moist. I looked away.

He sighed heavily. *I was afraid you would say that.* A rising panic, a clamour of noise in my head. The world seemed to roar in my ear, and I heard him explain through the din that there was some project he had wanted me involved in, and that she had argued vehemently against bringing me on board.

Whatever it is, I wish both of you would make up. You two are so young, and life's too short. He shook his head. *She gets angry so easily, and she's so stubborn.*

At this last part, I smiled wanly, because this is exactly who I remembered. The person who gave me a city she loved, whose absence left a gaping wound, then a scar. On one level, I wasn't surprised. This was way past its best-before date. My efforts to start conversations had gone nowhere, so I decided to let it go, deflect any questions from mutual acquaintances about how she was with noncommittal answers. I had almost managed to forget. But it was still a shock to find out just how deep it went. It was still a surprise to feel the force of her coming across through his words. I didn't know what I had done to make her feel like this about me. Or did I? I felt something crack, and every single doubt I'd had about myself came flooding back again.

I interrogated myself over and over again. Was I overbearing? Was I thoughtless? Was I enough, was I too much? It must have been my messiness. My predilection for late nights. My singing. My insecurities. My condiments taking up space in the fridge. My obsession with food. my lack of direction. My dependency. My forgetfulness. My passivity. My inability to understand why this would happen, which must therefore have been reason enough. I should have seen the signs. I thought back to a few weeks before she told me about her decision to go, one evening at the kitchen table, when she said: *I can't do this for the rest of my life.* I said, stupidly, *They should pay you more.* She shook her head, exasperated. *It's not about the money. It was never about the money. I've been thinking about what I want to do. You should really think about what you want as well.* God, it took me so long to understand that. I remembered, even when I didn't want to, the last time I saw her at

the house, picking up a box of things. I offered to help and she demurred. Standing at the door, I watched her rush out with the box. *Bye*, I said. *Bye*, she replied. She didn't look back.

Five years later, a friend told me that she could have meant every single word in that moment, and it would still have been valid for her to change her mind afterwards. I knew this was true. It still stung like hell.

■ ■

Where's Hiruko, how's he doing?

I was back in the shopping arcade, one stop on my usual circuit of Kyoto which I had pared down to the essentials. I didn't see Mr S's plump golden cat, so I assumed he was out prowling the neighbourhood.

Oh, he died a few months ago, said Mr S. He told me to wait, disappeared into the back of the shop, and emerged carrying a small coal-black cat.

Meet Yamato. We picked him up some time before Hiruko went. They got along quite well.

Why Yamato?

You know, Kuroneko, said Mr S. It took me a few seconds before it clicked. Yamato Transport is one of Japan's largest door-to-door delivery services, and everyone refers to the service by its logo, which is a black cat: *Kuroneko*. It's not the world's most original joke, but I was tickled nonetheless.

Yamato was a stray cat, so he was still wary and skittish, and didn't like being carried for long. *At least he's not as picky about food as Hiruko was*, said Mr S. *He doesn't even care about fish flakes.*

■ ■

The question I always got when people found out I used to live in Kyoto: *Which do you like better, Tokyo or Kyoto?* It's an obvious comparison. It was harder to answer than it should have been. I had, at best, an ambivalent relationship with Tokyo. It's too crowded. Rent is expensive. Stress runs like electricity through

everything. If I liked Kyoto, presumably I'd still live there. But I don't. I love it, and I don't live there.

They're so different, it's hard to compare. But two years was enough.

The next question: *Would you ever move back?* The question made me recoil. I couldn't envision rebuilding a life there: the only new jobs in town I qualified for were all in hospitality, which didn't interest me. I didn't know what I'd do with myself. I wished people would stop asking. There were so many reasons I left, and I didn't want to talk about any of them. Spectres seemed to mock me at every corner.

Why not move back to Kyoto? M said one day at the jazz kissa, after I'd grouched about the lack of green spaces in Tokyo. I entertained the idea for a moment, mapped out a what-if scenario, but I couldn't picture it. There was no future in my past. Instead, I told her my work kept me in Tokyo, and she nodded with understanding.

■ ■

It might've gone something like this: I was somewhere in Tokyo with S, with whom I became friends in a classical music cafe when I was a student. She listened to me make a restaurant reservation on the phone for us. They asked for a full name, and I gave them my usual pseudonym: Yoshida Akiko.

S asked why I gave them this name, and I explained that it was easier than translating my name into katakana for the hapless staff member on the other end of the call, and how I only ever used it for restaurant reservations. She noted that my choice of moniker was surprisingly Showa-flavoured, i.e. from a generation or two before us. 'Yoshida' is a generic enough surname, but first names ending in -ko are considered rather old-fashioned these days. I realised, with a start, that I'd forgotten how I became Akiko.

Precisely how I acquired this name eluded me until I dug up something I'd written a few years ago: a short piece on Yamaguchi-san. And I suddenly remembered the old woman in the green dress.

I never went back after that, I realised. I was so caught up in my own head that I forgot about her, and then I moved away. The next time I went back to Kyoto, I walked up and down her street, looking for her house. It felt pointless. There was no way she was alive anymore. I debated asking someone, but there was no one to ask. I hoped it had been painless. I kept the name.

■ ■

My last visit to Kyoto was in the autumn before the pandemic began. Shortly after that, I quit my seasonal tour guiding job with my old company, severing any working relationship with them. I later joked that this was prescient. The virus began as a ripple, swelled into a wave, then a tsunami. The world shut down. It was over a year and a half later when I finally made it back to the city.

It was routine by then. I checked into my hotel downtown, and then walked north along the Kamogawa to the delta. First the jazz cafe, then the shotengai to catch up with some familiar faces. Before, when I visited more frequently, the changes were subtler. A new sign here, one shop replacing another. This time I had been gone for over a year, and they were more dramatic. The soy doughnut shop had shutters up, its owner retiring to take care of his mother. The vegetable shop run by the dour-faced elderly couple – also gone, and so was the painting of them that used to hang on the wall, and their old-fashioned weighing scales.

I made my way to Mr S's shop. It had been a while since we'd seen each other, and I asked if he was doing well.

No, I'm not in a good way, he said. His frankness startled me. *My girlfriend died back in March all of a sudden. The night before we'd gone out for dinner, and the next morning she was dead. So no, I'm not doing very well at all.*

There were errands and things to take care of, he said, as I sat down on a stool in the corner of the shop. But he hadn't felt like doing anything for a long time, and just sat at home.

We used to go out for dinner, but ever since she died I haven't gone out to eat, he continued. *It's too lonesome by myself, and I*

always feel like I'm a bother when I go to a restaurant by myself. So lately, I've been learning to cook.

Do you not usually cook? I asked.

No, she'd cook. I'd be working in the store. He exhaled heavily, and I noticed how drawn his face looked. *I'm learning how to cook now. It's long overdue. The other day I made miso-simmered mackerel. Burned it a little bit. I'm still trying.*

I asked about his girlfriend, because this was the first I'd heard of her. They had been dating for a year and a half. She had been a friend he'd made on the neighbourhood patrol after he started going in his mother's stead. They began spending more time with each other, and eventually started dating around January the year before.

Apparently it was painless, he said. *She didn't suffer or anything like that. They said she was gone around three in the morning.*

It was so unfair, I thought, being in his late sixties and having finally found someone to spend his days with, only to quietly lose her in the night. Her lips, he said, were pale blue.

It was a slow day at the shop, so I ended up talking to him for two, three hours. A lot had changed in my absence. The swanky service apartment down the arcade belonged to some rich people from Tokyo, newly done up with a rooftop jacuzzi and everything, but no one here had been invited to have a look. The Tokyo people didn't even help out with the shotengai activities, or turn up for the meetings, which was the entire point of being part of the shotengai. The restaurant at the west end was new; it had been some tax office, and the old ladies there were always so fussy, complaining about the littlest things. Good riddance. The takoyaki place opposite was new, replacing a bubble tea shop run by a couple, a Japanese man and Taiwanese woman, a funny pair who'd had no interest in the shotengai either. Who knew where they'd gone?

His friends were trying to get rid of their possessions. As they drifted into their twilight years, they grew increasingly frenzied, trying to shed the weight of everything they'd accumulated over a lifetime. They told him he should do the same.

So are you trying to cut down?

Me? No. I want to be surrounded by stuff. Don't you?

He told me about riding his scooter along the Mackerel Highway the other week, making it out to Takashima before turning back towards Kyoto. It didn't go as fast as his old motorcycle, but it was good, the first time in a long while he'd felt that things were becoming a little brighter.

Before I left, he gave me a container of simmered soy kelp to eat over rice. He had cooked it the other day. *It's not the best*, he said, *but it's a little something to take with you.*

■ ■

Maybe it was my new antidepressants, which I finally started taking 15 years later than I should have done, or maybe it was the passage of time. Either way, I could now look back at the house without completely unravelling.

I took a morning walk around my old neighbourhood before going back to Tokyo. The persimmon tree, gone. I looked back and imagined her, suddenly saddled with a new colleague and housemate and friend bundled up in one anxious package. It couldn't have been easy. Not on top of everything else, the specifics of which aren't mine to tell.

I let myself recall details from the brief intersection of our lives: the sound of our keyboards clacking away, the kimono hanging in her room, the glow of her bedside light as she read in her futon. Ordinary moments knitting the days together. I thought of the life I might have led instead of moving to Kyoto: engulfed by the big city, consigned to an office. We would never have cracked silly puns at each other, hiked up a mountain together, or sat at the river. I thought of all the people I've lost and have yet to lose. I felt a quiet pop of love in my chest for everyone who was still here. I marvelled at the chance she once took on me, and I on her: my fork in the road, my turning point, my leap of faith.

■ ■

I was at the jazz kissa again. It had been a while, and M had been wondering how I was doing. She had kept my remaining tickets hanging on the wall. Why wouldn't she? I still counted as a

regular, even if it was now qualified with the past tense: I was the one who 'used to come here often'.

How's Yuki-chan? I asked. She stopped drying the plate in her hands and looked at me, her mouth falling open in an 'ah' sound.

She died back in February, said M.

Not corona?

No, it was cancer. She'd had it for a long time, but she was still coming by to drink until December. She went to the hospital when it all got too much.

She was 72. A peaceful death. Despite the news, I chuckled. *Typical Yuki-chan. Drinking till the end.* She had always been fond of her booze. It seemed like exactly how she would have spent her last weeks – enjoying herself as long as she could.

M's daughter K came in, and both of us meowed in greeting. She was here to ask if anyone wanted plums, because her trees had more plums than she knew what to do with. I wished I could have taken them off her hands, but I was going back to Tokyo in a few hours. I imagined her garden: lush and green, overflowing with fruits and vegetables. She looked over hungrily at her father's dinner, which M had prepared for him: rice, soup, grilled aubergine, a mound of slippery, slimy grated yamaimo, toasted nori, a deep-fried prawn croquette, and thick wedges of tomato. I overheard the other customers talking. There'd been a wedding, but also a funeral. It seemed like there was always someone leaving.

This is the price of leaving: you will always be late to the news, you will always miss the most important and unexpected moments of the lives you left behind, and you will always come back to a place that went on changing without you. I was already familiar with it. I've done it so many times. I was going to do it again.

There is an entire city beyond the door of this jazz kissa, all the streets I haven't walked down, all the shrines I haven't visited, all the people I haven't met. And yet I keep coming back to this kissa, where the curry is unmemorable but the coffee is always how I like it. All the unexceptional hours I've spent here, accumulating like layers of dust on a gramophone. How long will this kissa stay open? How many more visits do I have left? Will their son and daughter

take over one day, taking turns to brew coffee and choosing what record to play next?

A memory floats to the surface. It might have been early spring, a few months before I left, or maybe summer, when I was busy packing up my life in Kyoto. It's hard to tell, because that whole year was one long crying session. I was sitting in the kissa, my whole body shuddering. I was scared of everything – leaving, moving forward, everything. I sat at the counter of my favourite jazz kissa and cried. M looked a little shocked. She had never seen me cry like this. I had never cried like this in the cafe. She could have ignored me, carried on like nothing was wrong. But I should have believed, then, what she was going to say to me.

It's going to be alright, she said after a moment, smiling kindly at me. *You're going to be alright.*

Egg Love

Ask me about eggs, and I might launch into a paean to all the yolks I've ever eaten. For example, I could begin with tamago-kake gohan: cracking a raw egg into hot white rice, a drizzle of dark, punchy soy sauce, whipping it all into a marigold froth with chopsticks. Or I could swear that curry is incomplete without melted cheese and an egg, how there's no better snack than a 7-Eleven hard-boiled egg with its gooey centre. I could describe dragging a sheet of paper-thin wagyu through raw yolk. Bore you with ten puddings. At the end, default to throwing an egg on everything, because eggs make the meal when the cupboards are bare.

All of this is present and correct, but none of it comes close to what's true. I'm thinking about eggs and everything that constellates around them. For instance, my partner's favourite egg sandwiches in Kyoto, a city I love and he dislikes but has visited three times on my account. Breakfast with me is his consolation prize: a plate of omelette sandwiches, crustless, table salt for dipping. You might say that's reward enough. A salty, wobbly chawanmushi from the supermarket, slowly slurped after a harrowing wisdom tooth removal. A girl I once adored who showed me how to make steamed eggs in the microwave, measuring water with the halves of broken eggshells. In my memories live all our eggshells, literal and metaphorical.

There's no love quite like egg love.

I'm talking about knowing how someone likes their eggs. Do you really know someone if you can't say whether they prefer eggs fried or poached? My father loves his quick omelettes, cracked straight into the wok and flash-stirred until just tender, streaked yellow and white. His ideal half-boiled egg has whites slightly firm and cooked but a gooey yolk; my mother's is closer to three-quarters than half. Mine is closer to onsen tamago, as is my older sisters'; but I douse mine with lashings of white pepper and too much soy sauce. My sisters and I watch in fascinated horror as our youngest sibling stirs hers until uniformly coloured, not a trace of white permitted to

remain. A half-boiled egg tells you everything you need to know about a person.

I know my mother loves me because her minced pork omelette is exactly how I like it, a surfeit of small nubbly bits of meat coated in egg. I know my partner loves me because he lets me break the yolk on a fried egg. He knows how much I like watching the orange lava spill forth with an almost inaudible sigh when I press my spoon onto its filmy surface. Love is every single egg pun I give and receive, and when we can make scrambled eggs to each other's liking. It's jealousy that he learned to cook them from someone I can't stand, but pride because mine are better. It's love when we debate the merits of conbini egg sandwiches and who does it better. It's love when friends wait for me to film an egg collapsing into rice before eating. It's love, too, when friends tag me in posts because #yolkporn reminds them of me.

The girl I once lived with: I don't know how she liked her eggs. I made fried eggs for us because it was how I ate them, brown-bottomed and crisped in a pool of hot oil, but had she ever told me how she wanted them? Did she even like eggs, had I ever asked? I must have, but I don't remember. Perhaps this is why she refused to be fed towards the end. Another friend loved Stilton and tea, but I couldn't have told you if they even liked eggs and now I can never ask. Yet another girl I loved, our cross-continental bond knotted together by affection and a shared desire to flee our birthplace: I discovered seven years in that she detests eggs, avocados and lemons. Had I known her at all? Perhaps I hadn't; not long afterwards the knots between us unravelled into a years-long silence.

I could go on and on about the eggs I know and don't know, but they all lead back to the same place: ask the people you love how they like their eggs. Poach eggs if they like them, even if you don't; hard-boil and dress them with vinaigrette; let someone scramble eggs with cumin and paprika for you. Eat with them in the glare of late morning light. Share an omelette at midnight when the last train has gone. We leave broken eggshells behind us all the time; the point is to make them count.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Florentyna Leow is a writer and translator. Born in Malaysia, she lived in London and Kyoto before moving to Tokyo. Really, though, she lives on the internet.

Her work focuses on food and craft, with an emphasis on under-reported stories from rural Japan, like English Toast (neither English nor toast), a shrine dedicated to ice, and Japan's rarest citrus. She cannot go five minutes without thinking about food. *How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart* is her first book.

She can be found [@furochan_eats](#) on Instagram and Twitter, or at www.florentynaleow.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though this is a slim, modest volume, bringing it to life took an entire village of people and then some. In the knowledge that I will inevitably forget to include someone, I offer advance apologies, and much gratitude to the following people:

To Emma Dai'an Wright, who believed in these stories from the start, and brought this book to life in the midst of creating another life; and Pema Monaghan, whose compassionate and insightful editing made these essays better versions of themselves. To Christiana Jasutan, Kyaice Hendricks, Anne Welsh, Georgia Wall, and Lizzie Pearson-Hadley at the Emma Press for their efforts in bringing this book to readers.

I owe many literary debts to Polly Barton, Alexander Chee, Larissa Pham, Teju Cole, Helen Macdonald, Rachel Cusk, Rebecca Solnit, Nina Mingya Powles, Zedek Siew, Craig Mod, Steve Almond. One way or another, their books taught me how to write. Any inadequacies in these essays are my own.

To Rebecka Wolfe and Mac Salman, thank you for taking the time to talk about the vagaries of tour guiding and sharing your most horrifying, hilarious stories. Melinda Joe, for your feedback on my essay, and for inspiring others to live out their food writer dreams.

To Rhys Coleman, thank you for your big heart and thoughtfulness – having your read on the essays gave me the confidence to move forward with them. To Kate Kinoshita, sweet Leo sister, for all our expansive long-distance conversations on identity, careers and life work.

To David Ee and Jenny Kwee, whom I wish were my neighbours. To Noel Dellofano, who brightened my days in Kyoto. To Marc and Momoko, for a home and a persimmon tree.

To Claire Williamson, who introduced me to the joy of being closely edited by someone who cares.

To Kee Byung-keun, who once told me I “had the chops” to write – I have never forgotten this. To Joe Baur and Emily Ding, some of the coolest writers I know. Thank you to Eunice Liew and Mark Simpson, who helped a 13-year-old feel like she had something worth saying.

To Lim Ying Xian, Yeelian Tan, Shing-Yi Tan, Mo Stone, Sarah Chong, Lauren Chan, Keiko Ono, Eric Tseng, Sebastian Bury, David Wang. Thank you for seeing me through some truly messy times, hyping me up when I needed it most, and bringing joy and colour to my life. I am so grateful to know all of you.

To all my brilliant ex-colleagues, from whom I have learned how to carve spaces for myself in Japan. To all my newsletter subscribers and Instagram mutuals: thank you for believing in my writing.

To Kayoko Akabori and Yoko Kumano, who once gave me a platform to wax lyrical about soup curry; and Chris Rowthorn, who impressed upon me the wisdom of “some money is too expensive”.

To Aunt Karen, who inadvertently changed my life in 2006 by sending me to Japan. I would not be the same person without her.

Lifelong thanks to my parents, and my sisters Kristel, Rachel and Apple, who witnessed the lowest moments of the life described in this book and everything else beyond. I could not ask for more in a family.

I am indebted to Athena Lam, an extraordinary friend and person, who saw right through all my attempts to deflect and hide, pushed me to write better, and whipped this manuscript into something worth showing the world. Every writer should be so lucky to have an Athena in their lives.

To Alex Fisher, who has the misfortune of living with this messy and scatterbrained writer. Thank you for ruthlessly pruning my sentences, ensuring I ate and slept while writing this book, giving me the space to write, hyping me up to everyone, and making me laugh every day.

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20-something and uncertain about her future, Florentyna is exhilarated when an old acquaintance offers her an opportunity for work and cohabitation in a little house in the hills of Kyoto.

Florentyna begins a new job as a tour guide, organising elaborate trips around Kyoto's cultural hotspots. Amidst the tourist traps and temples, she develops her own personal map of the city.

Meanwhile, her relationship with her new companion develops an intensity as they live and work together. Their relationship burns bright, but seasons change and things grow strange between the two women.

How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart is a collection about the ways in which heartbreak can fill a place and make it impossible to stay.

PRAISE FOR *HOW KYOTO BREAKS YOUR HEART*

'I would let Leow's writing take me anywhere... Friendship, food, language, tour-guiding, and all the myriad kinds of love – whatever she's addressing in the moment, her fragrant, juice-filled prose is coated in a crispy-soft casing of wisdom, self-awareness and compassion.' Polly Barton



Photo credit: Alex Fisher

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Florentyna Leow is a writer and translator. Born in Malaysia, she lived in London and Kyoto before moving to Tokyo. Her work focuses on food and craft, with an emphasis on under-reported stories from rural Japan. *How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart* is her first book.



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MADE IN BIRMINGHAM

COVER DESIGNED BY ELİNA BRASLIŃA

